



Reading the Stories of Teaching and Learning

ABSTRACT

This essay is based on the opening keynote for ISSOTL 2016: Telling the Stories of Teaching and Learning in Los Angeles, California. I argue that we should examine our unspoken assumptions about genre in SoTL and consider what elements of teaching and learning get left out because they are too hard to represent in our dominant genres.

KEYWORDS

scholarship of teaching and learning (SoTL), genre, readers, discourse communities

This essay is based on the opening keynote for ISSOTL 2016: Telling the Stories of Teaching and Learning in Los Angeles, California. I have tried to keep it close to the original although there are places where the generic conventions of keynote presentation and written essay clash because the genres demand specific things from writers and audience. You'll notice a couple places where I talk directly to you, the reader, to suggest what might have been different the first time round.

I teach English literature, and as an English scholar and teacher, I believe in the power of stories. I think stories have the ability to change who we are as individuals as we learn about other worlds through text. So I was excited to see this bold, perhaps even dangerous, theme for ISSOTL 2016. I was intrigued by the quotation from E.O. Wilson (2014) on the call for proposals: "Story-telling [is] not just important for the human mind; it is the human mind." Wilson is a world-famous biologist, author of more than twenty books, two-time winner of the Pulitzer prize, founder of socio-biology, and advocate for stories. He argues against the division between the humanities and the sciences. But, a little later in the same interview, he says, "The ideal scientist thinks like a poet, writes like a bookkeeper . . . It has to be replicable, and it has to be testable. It has to be done with statistical evaluation of the soundness of the result" (Wilson, 2014). Now to be fair, Wilson is talking about science here. But what if we insert the word "scholarship" instead? Is that what we believe scholarship should be? What about the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL)? Where do stories of teaching and learning (a different SoTL) fit in?

We expect very different things from stories and scholarship, and these expectations not only shape our understanding of SoTL but also influence the way we understand teaching and learning. Some elements of teaching and learning cannot be easily represented in our current scholarly genres. Exploring this claim, I argue that genre shapes reading practices, but also that readers shape genre. I want us to look more carefully at our generic expectations for SoTL. I talk a bit about who benefits from dominant genres and who doesn't, before making an argument for *less* transparency in genre. I believe that, by making genres less transparent, we have the opportunity to examine our assumptions and consider what elements of teaching and learning get left out because they are too hard to represent in our dominant genres.

According to Merriam-Webster (because that's a common way to begin an essay), a genre is "a category of artistic, musical, or literary composition characterized by a particular style, form, or content." In literature classes we talk about poetry and prose, fiction and non-fiction. But everyone sorts many

types of texts according to genre every day. We do it without thinking much about it, and we react to these texts very differently based on our understanding of the subtleties of genre. Consider, for example, the differences between a wedding invitation, a notice about a department meeting, and a spam email: each text wants something from me. My recognition of subgenre shapes how I read and, hopefully, how I respond. Classification into genre is necessary for us to understand and react appropriately, but it's not natural. It's based on conventions, expectations, and one or more discourse communities with particular beliefs.

In a bit we're going to circle back to ISSOTL as a discourse community. But first, a poetic interlude. Now I've been to a lot of teaching and learning conferences where speakers get us to do some sort of psychology-based activity to demonstrate something about teaching and learning, but I've never seen a literary text used to illustrate something about teaching and learning. So you might feel a little uncomfortable because this doesn't fit your generic expectations of what a teaching and learning keynote, or what a scholarly essay for that matter, is supposed to be like, but I'll ask you to bear with me. We will talk about generic conventions of SoTL, but I wanted to start with 18th century literature because it's unlikely any of you have a huge investment in it. Some of you might have cats, and chances are your previous experience with cats will impact your reading experience.

Cats? You see, at the ISSOTL conference, people found an excerpt from Christopher Smart's "Jubilate Agno" on their tables. It is just an excerpt—the full piece is over 1200 lines long and takes around 3 hours to read aloud. At the conference, I read the excerpt out loud and then asked the audience to consider these questions: How do you read this text? Is it a poem? Click on [this link](#) to listen to me read while you read the excerpt from "Jubilate Agno" (written c. 1759-63/ published 1939) by Christopher Smart:

For I will consider my Cat Jeoffry.
For he is the servant of the Living God duly and daily serving him.
For at the first glance of the glory of God in the East he worships in his way.
For this is done by wreathing his body seven times round with elegant quickness.
For then he leaps up to catch the musk, which is the blessing of God upon his prayer.
For he rolls upon prank to work it in.
For having done duty and received blessing he begins to consider himself.
For this he performs in ten degrees.
For first he looks upon his forepaws to see if they are clean.
For secondly he kicks up behind to clear away there.
For thirdly he works it upon stretch with the forepaws extended.
For fourthly he sharpens his paws by wood.
For fifthly he washes himself.
For sixthly he rolls upon wash.
For seventhly he fleas himself, that he may not be interrupted upon the beat.
For eighthly he rubs himself against a post.
For ninthly he looks up for his instructions.
For tenthly he goes in quest of food.
For having consider'd God and himself he will consider his neighbor.
For if he meets another cat he will kiss her in kindness.
For when he takes his prey he plays with it to give it a chance.
For one mouse in seven escapes by his dallying.

For when his day's work is done his business more properly begins.
 For he keeps the Lord's watch in the night against the adversary.
 For he counteracts the powers of darkness by his electrical skin and glaring eyes.
 For he counteracts the Devil, who is death, by brisking about the life.
 For in his morning orisons he loves the sun and the sun loves him.
 For he is of the tribe of Tiger.
 For the Cherub Cat is a term of the Angel Tiger.
 For he has the subtlety and hissing of a serpent, which in goodness he suppresses.
 For he will not do destruction, if he is well-fed, neither will he spit without provocation.
 For he purrs in thankfulness, when God tells him he's a good Cat.
 For he is an instrument for the children to learn benevolence upon.
 For every house is incomplete without him and a blessing is lacking in the spirit.
 ...

For God has blessed him in the variety of his movements.
 For, tho he cannot fly, he is an excellent clamberer.
 For his motions upon the face of the earth are more than any other quadruped.
 For he can tread to all the measures upon the music.
 For he can swim for life.
 For he can creep.

Now, chances are most of you didn't click on the link; fair enough, I wouldn't have clicked either. I would have scanned the text long enough to identify basic theme and organizational strategy, a few seconds at most, and then moved on to the regular paragraphs. People at the conference didn't have that choice, and so their reading experience would have been very different.

How do we read the excerpt? Well, the first thing is I read it out loud. The particular sounds and rhythms were important to hear. Indeed, the sounds and rhythms may have been more important than the sense at times. Or if you actually read rather than scanned the excerpt, you might have focused on particular images, or (for the cat owners/lovers among you) you might have thought about your beloved cats; you might have felt something. The experience of reading this text is very different from reading a scholarly article that describes the movement of cats; it's also different from reading a story about a cat, with our expectations of plot—a beginning, some sort of conflict, action rising to a climax, and an end.

Genre shapes reading. Which is why it's not helpful to call everything a story. I know from various conversations at the conference that this can be a controversial statement. People like to use the metaphor of story to help people organize their ideas; it lets them talk about the deliberate and creative choices a writer makes when communicating ideas. But when we're thinking of texts as readers, calling everything a story doesn't give us enough explicit information, so our implicit norms for reading kick in, whether or not they are appropriate for the particular text. The English teachers out there know that first-year students will call everything a story: a play, a speech, a poem, a chapter on photosynthesis. And that's a problem because the metaphor of storytelling obscures important differences. Different genres require different types of reading. We cannot effectively read a scholarly article the same way we read a novel. We're not interested in the same things like character development or suspense. But many readers, especially when faced with unfamiliar texts, will default to comfortable or familiar reading strategies whether or not those strategies are appropriate for the particular text. Then they blame the text for being too difficult or for not conforming to a genre it was never part of. We know that explicit

instruction in generic conventions can help readers understand more, which is why we explicitly teach novices how to read scholarly articles, for example, spending time describing what happens in an abstract or a literature review. But it's also important to recognize that generic conventions are not universal. Not only do the generic conventions of scholarly articles vary by discipline, they also change over time. We change them.

Is "Jubilate Agno" a poem? It depends on whom, and when, you ask. For 18th century readers, it would have been the ravings of a madman. Not just because Smart was in an insane asylum when he wrote it, nor because it was about a cat, but because of how it talked about the cat. Compare "Ode on the Death of a Favourite Cat Drowned in a Tub of Goldfishes" by Thomas Gray (published 1748). As the title suggests, the cat tries to get the fish, loses her balance, falls in, and drowns. The last stanza is

*From hence, ye beauties, undeceived,
Know, one false step is ne'er retrieved,
And be with caution bold.
Not all that tempts your wandering eyes
And heedless hearts, is lawful prize;
Nor all that glisters gold.*

Now that's a poem. Not only does it have regular rhyme and rhythm, important formal elements for a poem of the time, it uses the cat's fate to teach a moral lesson for young women. After all, who could possibly be interested in reading about a cat just for the sake of learning about a cat?

Readers shape genres, and genres change over time as their readers do. Literary theorist Louise Rosenblatt (1978/1994) argued that meaning doesn't reside in the text or the reader; rather it is created in a transaction between text and reader. Her theory of reading was so far outside of the norms of how reading was conceptualized in the early 20th century that it took almost forty years for acceptance. Another theorist Hans Robert Jauss (1970) talked about the transactions between readers and text in terms of horizons of expectations. He believed that how we read a text at a particular moment of time is the result of cultural and generic codes. A new text can either fulfill our expectations, and so is easier/more enjoyable to read, or it might challenge our expectations, which might be a positive or negative experience. The challenge might result in new perception and perhaps adjusted expectations for new texts in that genre. But changing a genre is not an individual activity; it occurs over time and requires multiple readers reacting in similar ways. It often involves what linguist John Swales (1990) called a discourse community, which he described as having

- Broadly accepted goals
- Mechanisms for intercommunication and feedback
- A threshold number of members with expertise
- Specific Lexis
- Genres where members' beliefs and naming practices matter.

Mary Taylor Huber suggested back in 1999 that SoTL had the potential to develop discourse communities. I think we've seen that happen with ISSOTL over its history. ISSOTL is a discourse community. We share the desire to improve teaching and learning in our different contexts; we present and discuss at this conference and publish in teaching and learning journals; we have members with expertise; we share language and metaphors, for example "evidence of student learning," "trading zones," or "the big tent;" we have genres. Indeed, our beliefs and naming practices shape our genres, but some of

our beliefs go unspoken, perhaps because of that big tent. We want to be inclusive, so we sometimes talk in code—like talking about stories of teaching and learning and then worrying that people aren't providing evidence systematically. Since when does a story provide evidence systematically? What do we mean by "systematically?" Or "evidence?"

During the keynote presentation, I asked people to discuss the following questions at their tables and then report back to the big group. What are our beliefs about SoTL? How do these beliefs shape our genres? What are the generic conventions we expect? Are there elements of teaching and learning that are difficult to fit within these generic conventions? Reading this essay, you don't get to hear the different voices; you're stuck with me. Here are some of the generic conventions I thought of and some of the beliefs or assumptions that underlie them. We were at a SoTL conference on Telling the Stories of Teaching and Learning when SoTL itself is sometimes described in opposition to story: we look "beyond the anecdotal" (Salvatori, 2002). We seek to examine evidence of student learning in a systematic way (Chick, 2011), but I don't have evidence of student learning, and I suspect most of you don't either. I have artifacts created by students that might contain traces of learning, but at best they are oblique measures open to many interpretations. I worry about a medicalized model of education framed in terms of problems and interventions, and so on. The beliefs and generic conventions of SoTL shape what we can talk about because that's what genres do. They help us process, understand, and communicate information, but at a cost.

Genre theorist David Chandler (1997) claimed that "Generic frameworks may function to make form (the conventions of the genre) more 'transparent' to those familiar with the genre, foregrounding the distinctive content of individual texts." I want to take a closer look at this claim, focusing on what I think of as a troubling transparency. We assume that transparency is necessarily a good thing; we call for greater transparency from decision makers, for example. We assume that transparency means we see more—that it is "clear." Essentially, when we ask our leaders for transparency, we're asking for an audit trail of decision-making processes. But transparency in the case of generic frameworks means it is so clear that it is invisible. The conventions of genre are experienced as natural, so we have no way to tell how genre has constrained and shaped what can be talked about.

Some people benefit from this transparency. Stories and storytellers who fit easily within the dominant generic framework are privileged. They have greater opportunities for readership, and it is easier for readers to appreciate and recognize "the distinctive content of the individual texts" (Chandler, 1997) within the generic framework. Readers familiar with the conventions understand text with less effort. Jauss (1970) would talk about the pleasure that familiarity brings as our expectations are satisfied.

Some people don't benefit from transparency. Stories and storytellers who are too far outside the dominant framework risk being silenced. Here is an example (or three). In English we don't usually have research posters. It's just not a genre we use, but I have found it very useful to have my undergraduate students create research posters to disseminate their preliminary interpretations to peers before the final papers. These posters do not follow the conventions of the scientific poster. Why should they? They are usually handmade; they are often very creative; they are beautiful. But I don't encourage my students to participate in Undergraduate Poster Day anymore. Not since one of them was phoned by the Office of Research Services; they told her she would be the only person there with a handmade poster and explained it would look more professional to have it printed. They didn't want her to be embarrassed. She thanked them and presented her handmade poster; she was happy with her aesthetic choices, and confident enough to be different. She could have translated it into scientific poster form, but it would have been an impoverished argument. This next poster about Louise Erdrich's novel *Tracks* could not be translated into a printed template.

Figure 1. Poster on Louise Erdrich's *Tracks*



The student has created two small oil paintings depicting Anishinaabe and Catholic missionary interactions. The main part of the poster is black, though if you lift up each of the flaps, you'll find a main claim, theoretical frame, textual details, and references. But this act of lifting up the flap, or looking behind the veil, is itself an intertextual reference to a gothic novel written two hundred years before. In that novel, looking behind the veil is a trope of misreading; the heroine cannot interpret the evidence of her own eyes accurately because of her expectations and assumptions. The student places the viewer in the position of mis-reader, implying that we won't understand this novel any more than the Catholic missionaries could understand the Anishinaabe culture. In the process, the student pushes against our assumptions about research posters and what we consider knowledge. Now I was fortunate to be able to write about these posters in a special issue of *Teaching & Learning Inquiry* focused on Arts and Humanities SoTL (Manarin, 2016). But how could I represent the learning I think this poster suggests in a regular SoTL article for a journal seeking data-driven evidence of student learning? Is it enough to say something like "X of 25 posters demonstrated application of theoretical concepts; Y of 25 posters involved some attempt to match aesthetic elements with themes of text." If I code and recode, collapsing

codes into themes, systematically seeking a macro narrative, what do I lose? What learning is silenced as I try to fit a dominant generic framework?

Readers who don't experience conventions as transparent also don't benefit from transparency. Readers with a background in STEM disciplines or in Arts and Humanities may struggle with the conventions of SoTL articles, and the epistemologies, or the ways of knowing, those conventions imply. If those conventions are presented as natural, there is dissonance between the assumption of transparency and the reading experience. Naming the conventions and assumptions at least gives people the possibility of considering how they fit into this endeavour.

But I want to spend a couple minutes considering a group of readers we might assume only benefit from transparency—those who experience conventions as transparent, who are comfortable reading, and maybe writing, SoTL articles, but who are so comfortable that they don't recognize other possibilities. For me, the most productive moments in SoTL have been those times where I have been forced to confront my assumptions about the way learning works. My discipline is a source of strength, but it is also a trap into particular ways of thinking. SoTL has allowed me to question many of my assumptions and practices because it and the genres it involves are unfamiliar.

I'm not talking about a "trading zone" between disciplines (Huber & Morreale, 2002) because, honestly, while some of us need to borrow or adapt the tools of other disciplines to do SoTL, people from the social science disciplines probably don't. But all of us could benefit from a deliberate naming of assumptions and practices. Naming our assumptions, making those conventions translucent rather than transparent, can lead to a productive friction that allows us to see the familiar anew. Shklovsky (1917/2004), a Russian literary theorist, would have called it "defamiliarization." Defamiliarization is often uncomfortable, but it might let us glimpse those elements of teaching and learning that get left out of our current understanding of SoTL. It might let us read, and write, the stories of teaching and learning differently.

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