



MONASH University

Arts

# Content Matters:

Curriculum development challenges in Academic writing programs

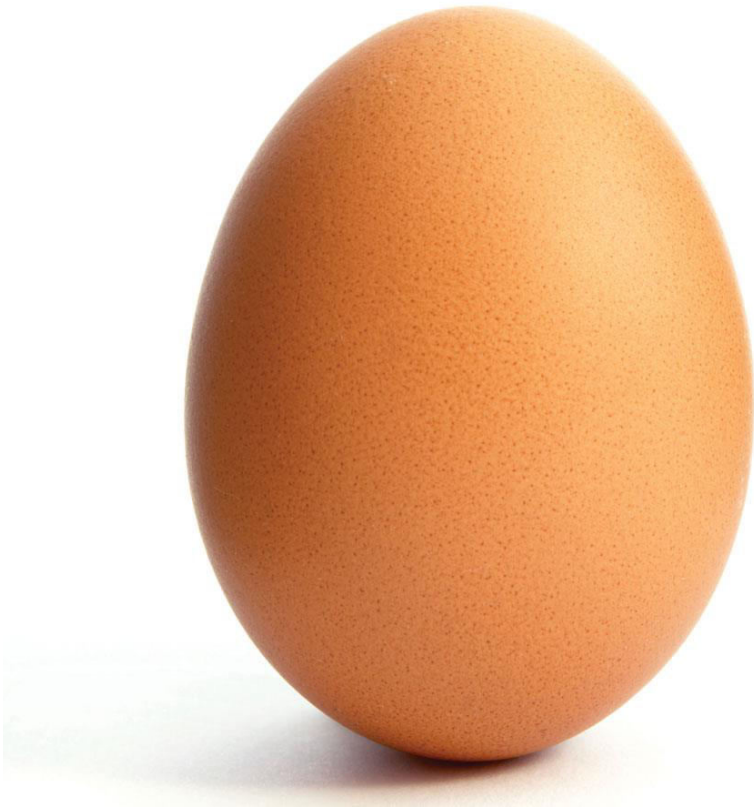
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# The content problem



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- **What should students write about?**

# Interviews with North American teachers and students of writing (March / April 2017)



- **In depth / semi-structured interviews**
- **phenomenographic**  
“a research method adapted for mapping the qualitatively different ways in which people experience, conceptualise, perceive, and understand various aspects of, and phenomena in, the world around them” (Marton, 1986, 31)
- **Staff n = 7**
- **Student n = 8**



# Different settings / different challenges



## Canadian Writing Program

COMMUNICATIONS AND MEDIA  
DEPT.

- 'transition' or pathway / introductory
- writing in disciplines (eg. nursing/ engineering)
- Writing pedagogy *mixed* current traditional & 'rhetorical' discourse / genre





## Ivy – a content' based writing program

- Compulsory 'writing requirement' (**ALL** students)
- Students choose their 'topic' focus
- Writing teachers have 'discipline' interest / background in the topic
- Writing pedagogy is mixed (rhetoric)

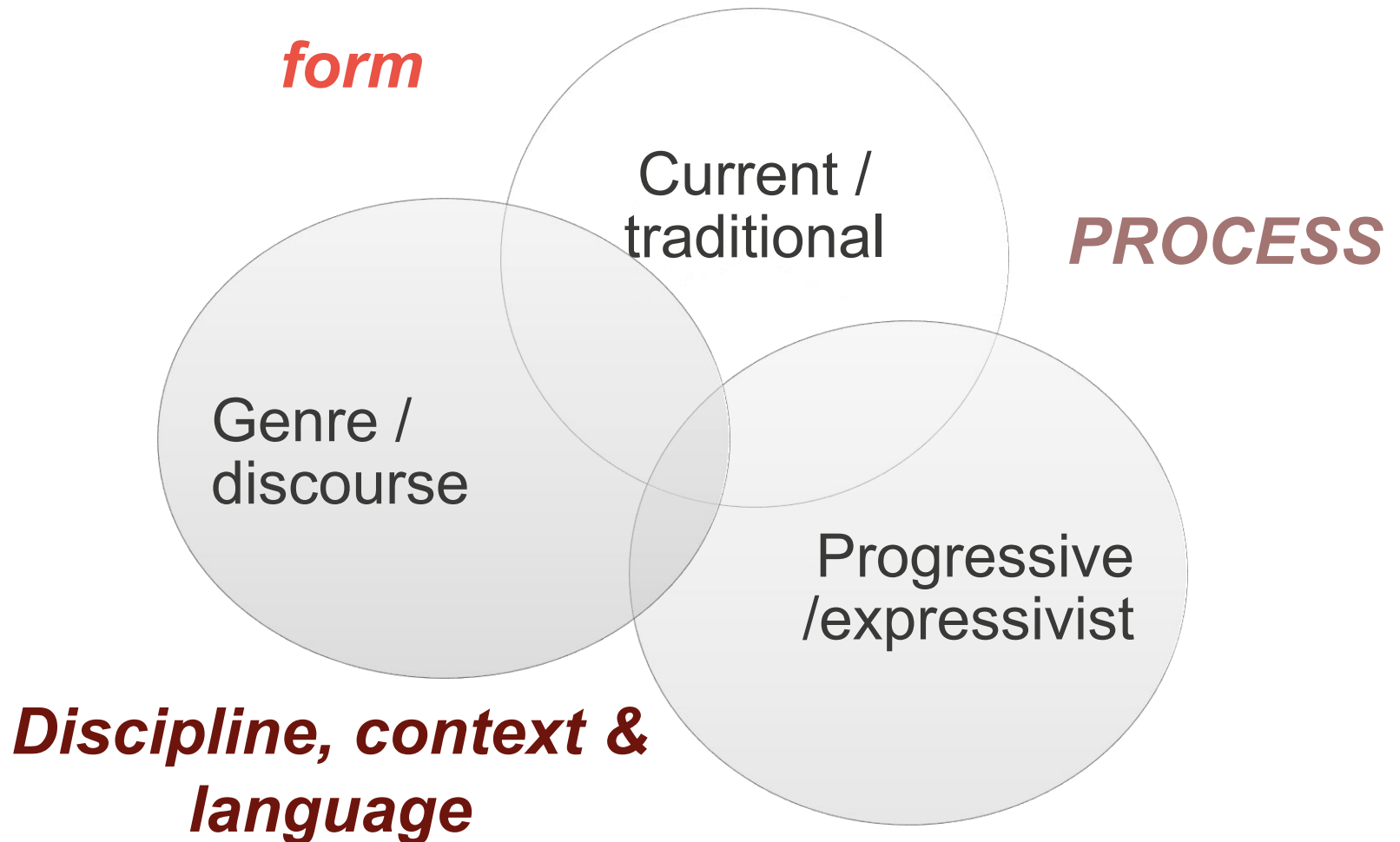


## State – writing program

- 'writing requirement' (*some exemptions*)
- Students choose their 'topic' focus
- Writing teachers mostly have English / Writing / media background
- Writing pedagogy – 'enquiry' (discourse)



# A range of pedagogies



# What about *CONTENT* ?

## **LIBERAL education**

- Literature / humanities
- ‘epistemology’
- Civics – Politics
- Controversies
- Popular culture

## **Student choice**

- any interest
- their own experience
- Their ‘discipline’ major

## **Interdisciplinary topics**

- Childhood
- Artificial intelligence
- Cosmopolitanism



## Content matters?

“the result of [an] emphasis on practice and process is a curriculum in which subject matter has been deemed largely irrelevant [...] **students are invited to read and write about family or work or media or government or history or sports or cultural theory or the environment or anything under the sun**, and the reason is because, however much one teacher may prefer this subject to that , **the field as a whole presumes that subject matter, at least, in the first-year course, doesn't matter.**”

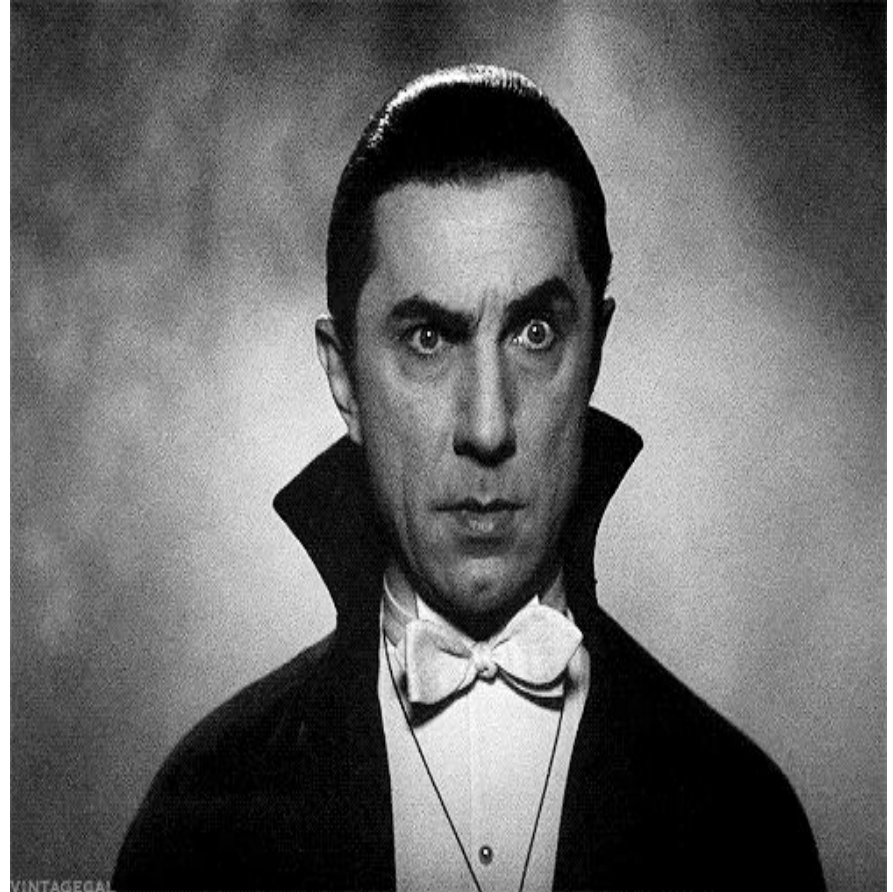
(James Seitz, 2005, 26)



# No vampires!

Writing classes, especially first year classes, **must absolutely and always be grounded in Writing Studies, must always be about the study of writing.** They should not, as I heard recently and anecdotally, engage students in writing about vampires--nor about political issues, nor about recent controversies, nor about other things that are not about writing.

(Linda Adler-Kassner, 2012, 132.)



# Writing about Writing / WAW

## Threshold concepts in writing

‘there is no evidence that FYC [first year composition] has taught students to write for the university and none to suggest it will start to do so as soon as we discover the next best teaching method’

[...]

we would do our students and our discipline more good by **giving up this false hope**, revealing the myth of transience [transfer?] for what it is, and pursuing new goals

(Elizabeth Wardle, 2009: 784)



# On the other hand...

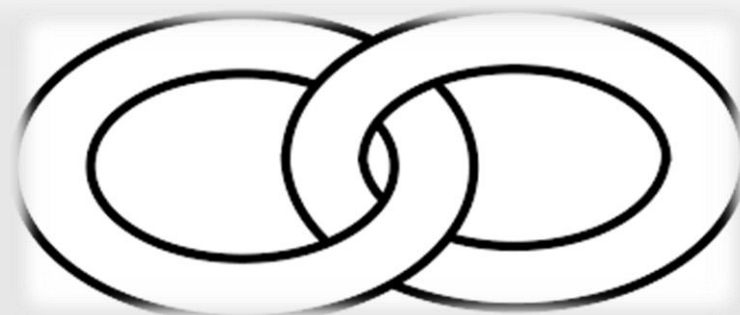
...in an era when students feel bound to approach school pragmatically and to make choices that will bring them closer to a career, **we should look for ways to enable them to have some fun [...]** Even though—or perhaps precisely because—FYC is a required course, it can be a place where students pursue intellectual projects out of curiosity and interest in a subject.

(Sandie Friedman, 'This way for vampires', 2013)

# 3 curriculum challenges



inspire



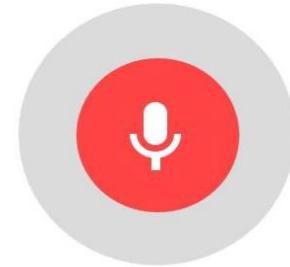
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transfer





# THE INTERVIEWS



# The purpose of the course?

*the other big shift is research **seeing research as an investigative process not a gathering of information.** That's a huge, titanic shift. Because they are typically thinking of information as worthy on its own of being passed along and to understand that all this information is being gathered in the service of an argument [...] That's a deep, underlying motive of the course, to help them see this.*

[Paul, US-A1]

*what I learned here as far as establishing my thesis, **knowing my motive** and learning how to read such things, making sure my sources are peer reviewed, what that means.*

[Nina, US-S1]

## SHARED PURPOSE?

*I guess what I think the course equips them with is not the genre knowledge, but it's **how to ask good questions** [Isabel, CA-A1]*

*They give us a variety of topics, like 'I have a dream' by Martin Luther King, 'What you pawn I will redeem' [a story by Sherman Alexie] [...] **I can't stop reading**, this class has really grasped me, like, I can't stop reading, it's so interesting. [Zoe, CA-S5].*

# linking with ‘academic’ content

*...you’re balancing the desire to put them through an experience of actually **finding out how complex something is**, and then being able to figure out how to carve out something that they can say.*

[Kim, US-A2]

*I feel like definitely it’s a bit of a struggle in order **to fully understand the academic piece of writing that’s already out there**, and then furthermore to come up with a novel idea that builds off that currently existing academic piece in an interesting way.*

[Ben, US-S3]

# This thing that matters...

*The most important thing is that they, to me the priority is to get to subjects that really matter to them, that it's easier to get them to see how they would really matter, you know, **that it would be useful for them to figure this out**, and that they would like to understand about this. **this thing that matters in their own life**, where they are at as 18 year olds.*

[Kim, US-A2]

*Not to make them better university writers, but to make them **better lifelong writers** [...] to [help them to] think about themselves as writers*  
[James, US-A4].



## Transfer and inspiration?

*It's quite clear they're preparing you for academic writing. And the thesis is the epitome of what some students might do while they're here, so it just makes sense that **it's preparing them for that thesis.***

[Emma, US-S4]

*My first choice was 'childhood'... because, personally, felt like, **I didn't give myself much of a childhood**,...so I thought I should attempt to re-visit that*

[Anne, US-S2]

# Adapted to the climate?



# A distinctive Australian approach?



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- Slide 9 - Bela Lugosi.gif source: <http://ihorror.com/classic-horror-icons-bela-lugosis-8-best-films/>
- Slide 14 - John O’neill (2006) Looking across the Red Sand Garden to the Visitor’s Centre, Australian Garden, Royal Botanic Gardens, Cranbourne, Victoria, Australia. 29 June, 2006.

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