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## Using Online Genres to Promote Students' Audience Awareness

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## Using Online Genres to Promote Students' Audience Awareness

### Cover Page Footnote

I would like to thank two anonymous reviewers who provided valuable suggestions and comments on the earlier versions of this paper. I am also grateful to my colleague Nolan Weil for his insightful feedback.

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# Using Online Genres to Promote Students' Audience Awareness

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## Abstract

Writing assignments that students complete in university courses are typically designed for evaluation and grading by the instructor, who, therefore, acts as the sole reader of student written work. However, most written genres students would--and do--encounter in the world beyond the classroom are composed for diverse audiences who influence writers' text construction considerably. Because most students will be likely to write for multiple audiences as part of their career or future academic endeavors, it is crucial for them to develop a sense of audience awareness as an indispensable rhetorical concept that shapes composing processes. Writing online presents a great opportunity to expose students to various genres that promote their interaction with real audiences, thus contributing to their writing development. The purpose of the current article is to describe several online genres that could be introduced in the classroom to develop students' sense of audience consideration. These genres include product reviews, blogs, instructional articles, and travel guides.

*Keywords:* audience awareness, writing, genre, writing online

## Introduction

The majority of college-level writing assignments are designed with the ultimate goal of being assessed and graded. Often times, therefore, they are primarily written for a sole reader--the instructor. There is no reason, however, that students should not be writing for broader audiences, including the ones beyond the classroom. In fact, most writing genres they already encounter on a daily basis outside of institutional settings (e.g., emails, text messages, tweets, shopping lists, party invitations, comments on social media, and discussion boards) are written for various audiences. Similarly, as future professionals, students will be likely to write for multiple audiences as part of their career or future academic endeavors. Therefore, it is crucial for students to develop a sense of consideration for audience as an indispensable rhetorical element that shapes composing processes.

Audience is broadly defined as “the recipients of a message in a rhetorical situation” (Anderson, 2012, p. 6). Whereas the presence of audience is seemingly obvious in a writing process (i.e., “Something is written for someone to read”), applying this concept may appear to be challenging for students, particularly novice writers (Carvalho, 2002; Tang, 2005). Audience awareness, however, is not always explicitly taught in the classroom, unless it is a composition course that follows learning-to-write approaches to teaching writing (for the distinction between “learning-to-write” and “writing-to-learn” approaches, see Ferris & Hedgcock, 2014, Reichelt et al., 2012). Therefore, students may primarily focus on expressing themselves--that is producing *writer-based prose*, rather than crafting their writing in ways that would accommodate specific needs and expectations of the reader--that is producing *reader-based prose* (Flower, 1979).

Virtual digital spaces of the Internet expand the scope of audiences considerably by connecting people from various demographic backgrounds and locations and providing numerous opportunities to compose in many genres with various degrees of formality. Writing projects that involve online genres, therefore, appear to afford a favorable pedagogical venue to help students develop their audience awareness (Magnifico, 2010). Accessibility of online written materials is an obvious advantage when planning such projects, as teachers can find multiple pedagogical resources and writing models to create “units, assignments, and activities that engage students directly in purposeful encounters with authentic genres” (Ferris & Hedgcock, 2014, p. 118).

This article describes four writing genres that can help students develop their audience awareness: product reviews, blogs, instructional articles, and travel guides. Composing in these genres entails an authentic social component that allows writers to communicate to real audiences in real sociocultural contexts. As Magnifico (2010) stated,

Responding to an authentic audience requires students to go through the critical process of communicating about their ideas. They must [...] consider what that specific kind of audience wants or needs to hear, and review how that audience’s viewpoint might reflect back onto their own ideas (p. 180).

The description of each genre is followed by several scaffolding activities<sup>1</sup> that instructors can implement to facilitate student work with the genre. Each of these activities can be modified according to instructional contexts and student populations.

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<sup>1</sup> Scaffolding activities are types of instructional activities that offer support to enhance students’ learning of new skills and acquisition of new knowledge, as well as promote learner autonomy.

## Product Reviews

### Description

Online shopping is a popular way of purchasing products for many people around the world, and it is certainly becoming more and more widespread due to its convenience. One of the many advantages of online shopping, and a key factor for many people in their decision-making process, is becoming familiar with other customers' experiences with the product. Informative and unbiased product reviews that balance the description of positive features and constructive criticism can be extremely helpful to other users (Garnefeld, Helm, & Grötschel, 2020).

From an audience standpoint, writing a product review may give students a chance to visualize specific groups of customers that that might use a particular product and estimate the expectations that these groups of people may have for the product. Such visualization of potential audience can help students compose an effective product review.

The writing of product reviews could be appropriate in any number of different college courses. For example, instructors of biology, chemistry, or engineering courses can assign students to write a review of a product from their corresponding field. Alternatively, both in humanities and social sciences, students can be asked to write a review of a website, a software, a book, or another printed material.

### Scaffolding Activities

#### *Discussing Genre Conventions*

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Online product reviews have unique genre constraints, including specific lexical and stylistic features, organizational and rhetorical patterns, and author's tone and voice. Discussions regarding this genre will raise students' awareness of these conventions, providing a necessary preparatory stage for their own composing processes. As in the case with most written genres, however, there is a certain degree of flexibility in terms of genre conventions. Therefore, by analyzing and discussing the genre of product review, students should take into account "obligatory conventions, optional features, and the degree of variation allowed" (Ferris & Hedgcock, 2014, p. 118). The textual analysis of product reviews may also help students understand differences between facts and opinions.

### Analyzing Product Reviews

Looking at multiple product reviews available online (most commonly, on [Amazon](#) and [Consumer Reports](#)) and analyzing them individually, in small groups, or as a class may provide

students with an in-depth perspective as to what counts both as their strengths and weaknesses. Based on the analysis, students can create a list of effective and less effective features of a particular product review and compare it with their classmates. To make this activity more structured, teachers can prepare a few questions to serve as guidelines for the analysis. Another possibility would be asking students to rank several product reviews using a rating sheet or a list of criteria. In each of these options, students need to explain their responses, or justify their ratings, by providing specific examples from the sample reviews.

### *Assessing Product Reviews from an Audience Point of View*

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An effectively written product review should always have a clear vision of the audience the product is geared toward. To help students unravel the concept of audience through working with this genre, the teacher can ask students to assess several models of product reviews with the audience in mind. Some questions that could facilitate this activity may include:

1. Who is the primary audience for this product review (in other words, for whom is it written)?
2. What are some needs and expectations of this particular population of consumers?
3. From your perspective, does the review satisfy these needs and expectations?
4. Is the tone of the review appropriate given the target audience?
5. What about the language and the style?
6. Are there any gaps in the review? (In other words, what should the author have addressed to better meet the needs and expectations of the target audience?)
7. If you belong/(ed) to this population of consumers, do/would you find this review helpful?
8. How would you revise this review to make it more effective from an audience point of view?

### *Expressing an Opinion*

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Providing a fair opinion supported with clear and cogent evidence is an important element of an effective product review. The teacher can promote this skill by designing classroom activities that aim at teaching students to effectively express and explain their positions. This can be done through holding class/group debates, giving students written prompts to respond to, asking students to explain their experiences with particular products they have recently used, or giving them the opportunity to either agree or disagree with another person's perspective or statement. The teacher can also supply a list of phrases that can be used in debates and arguments, including language for expressing a position (e.g., *I believe that...*; *The way I see it is...*), supporting an opinion (e.g., *The reason is...*; *I really think that because...*), and expressing a polite and respectful disagreement (e.g., *Here is another way to think about it...*; *True, but how about...*).

### *Exchanging Opinions About the Same Product*

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To extend the previous activity, geared toward helping students express an informed opinion and provide strong reasons/evidence to support it, the teacher can ask all students to exchange their assessments of a product everyone in class is familiar with/has previously used. To implement this activity, the teacher needs to make sure all students have an experience with the product. The activity can be designed in multiple ways: by having students brainstorm pros and cons of the product, by asking them to respond to a series of questions about the product and then share their responses with the classmates, by holding a class debate with one side presenting and supporting a more favorable opinion and the other side presenting and supporting a less favorable opinion about the product, or by having students work with a partner and create a pair review covering both positive and negative attributes of the product collected from both partners.

### *Conducting Peer Reviews*

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Students can also provide feedback on their classmates' reviews in various peer review activities (either oral or written). As known, peer reviews can be helpful not only for the author but also for the reviewer (Lundstrom & Baker, 2009); therefore, through effective and properly designed peer-review activities, students will benefit both from giving and receiving feedback. The literature offers teachers key pedagogical principles of peer feedback (e.g., Baker-Smemoe, 2018; Ferris & Hedgcock, 2014; Hyland, 2019; Storch, 2019; Yim & Warschauer, 2019) as well as numerous practical suggestions (e.g., Ferris & Hedgcock, 2014; Nelson, 2013; Shvidko, 2013a, 2013b, 2014a, 2014b; Wang & Perren, 2013) on how to implement effective peer review activities to facilitate students' writing skills, promote their analytical and critical thinking, and help them become more aware of their own writing.

## **Blogs**

### **Description**

In our Internet era, many people enjoy both writing and reading blogs, making them one of the most popular writing genres in virtual spaces. Countless blog posts are being created every day, covering a wide variety of topics and targeting diverse populations of readers. Similar to personal journals, blogs present a great opportunity for anyone who enjoys this type of writing and is eager to share their thoughts, ideas, feelings, and experiences with a broader readership. Along with helping students expand their knowledge about the conventions of the blog genre (Oravec, 2002; Richardson, 2005) and develop an appreciation for their readership through blog writing (Williams & Jacobs, 2004), this genre can accomplish various other purposes

related to writing development, including helping students establish a consistent writing habit (Armstrong & Retterer, 2008; Fellner & Apple, 2006) and giving them the opportunity to understand the meaningfulness and value of their personal writing (Murray & Hourigan, 2006; Oravec, 2003; Pinkman, 2005).

Selecting a blog theme would depend on the subject matter of a particular course or students' individual preferences and experiences. For instance, in a language class, students can write blogs on their language learning experiences or provide suggestions to other learners on how to avoid common mistakes in a particular language or navigate a certain socio-cultural environment while studying abroad. In an upper-level university course, students can describe their paths towards becoming professionals in their field. Online blogs also offer a wide range of applicability in different undergraduate college classrooms. Thus, students majoring in education can write blogs focusing on their teaching experiences. Those studying psychology may discuss topics from various psychological subfields. Similarly, sociology students can reflect on a variety of current issues regarding everyday societies, such as population and demographics, social organization, cultural biases, human ecology, and social change. Or students can choose to describe their experience of being a university student, a foreigner, someone new in town, a roommate, or a new parent. Students' personal interests and hobbies may also offer a wide range of stimulating topics that they can explore in their blogs.

## Scaffolding Activities

### *Examining Genre Conventions*

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Being quite informal in nature, this genre has rather fluid conventions. Nevertheless, some blogs are more effective than others and attract hundreds or even thousands of followers. Therefore, it is helpful for students to understand what makes an effective blog post before they create their own. The analysis of blogs from a genre point of view, done either in small groups or a whole class, can be a useful learning task. First, students would look through several blog models and identify interesting linguistic, rhetorical, stylistic, or organizational features (i.e., various textual features that stood out to them). Then they would discuss their findings with others in class, thus creating a more concrete description of this genre. The discussion questions could include:

1. Are there any particular organizational patterns you noticed across the samples? What are they?
2. Did you notice any similarities between authors' tone and stance in these pieces?
3. What are some common stylistic features that stood out to you in these blog posts?
4. What can you say about the language used in these samples (e.g., various degrees of formality, patterns in sentence structures and punctuation, certain use of vocabulary)?

5. From your point of view, how did the author's understanding of their audience in each sample influence the content, the style, and the organization of the piece?
6. Based on your analysis, do you think this genre has specific conventions? If so, what are they? If not, what implications does it have both for writers and readers?

### *Compiling Dos and Don'ts*

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Another simple activity that would expose students to genre conventions of online blogs is creating a list of dos and don'ts. Students would make this list based on the analysis of several blog posts in which they would identify effective and less effective features (e.g., rhetorical, stylistic, linguistic, and/or organizational), as well as indicate whether the authors have knowledge of the subject matter and exhibit audience awareness. Alternatively, the teacher can follow a deductive model by first presenting a list of dos and don'ts to students and then asking them to find those dos and don'ts in several sample blogs.

### *Analyzing a Blog From an Audience Point of View*

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To do this activity, the teacher would select one blog post (the topic/focus of the blog can vary depending on the target instructional objective) and create 5-7 descriptions of potential/imaginary readers. For example, the description would read: *Gloria is a 27-year-old graduate student majoring in psychology. After her graduation, she is planning to open her own practice to help people with behavioral, emotional, and mental disorders. Gloria's hobbies include cooking, playing tennis, and crafting. She has a 3-year-old son.* Students would analyze the selected blog in relation to each imaginary reader by answering the following questions:

1. Would this blog be interesting to this person? Why or why not?
2. What areas/topics covered in this blog would particularly attract the attention of this reader?
3. What changes could be made in this blog to make it more appealing to this particular reader?
4. What are other blogs that would attract this reader's attention?

Students can discuss their thoughts in small groups and provide specific examples from the blog to support their positions.

### *Creating a List of Blogs Targeting a Particular Reader*

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This activity can help students visualize a broader spectrum of reader characteristics. Students would create their own imaginary reader and write a description (similar to the one above). They would then find examples of online blogs that, from their perspective, would potentially be appealing to this particular reader. For example, blogs on the following topics could possibly draw the attention of Gloria, described in the previous activity: people's emotional

and behavioral disorders, navigating the life of a graduate student, publishing as an emerging scholar in the field of psychology, starting and marketing a business, attracting potential clients and customers, dealing with toddler temper tantrums, effective communication with little children, as well as various blogs related to sports, crafts, and cooking. Alternatively, instead of creating a fictional character, students can use themselves as readers and find online blogs that would appeal to them personally. The activity can be done individually or in small groups. (If done in groups, students would write a short description of themselves to share with other group members).

### *Comparative Analysis of Blogs*

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Students can expand their understanding of blog genre conventions by conducting a basic comparative analysis of several blog posts targeting the same population(s) of readers. For example, they can examine a few blogs that describe how to upgrade a kitchen on a budget, comparing their rhetorical arrangement, stylistic and linguistic features, and/or organizational patterns, as well as the authors' ability to appeal to the target audience. To facilitate the activity, the teacher can prepare questions guiding students through the analysis. The questions can include:

1. From a genre conventions point of view, which blog post is the most/the least effective and why?
2. What particular features make this blog effective/less effective?
3. In your opinion, which of the samples succeeded the most in attracting the target audience and why?
4. What suggestions would you give to the authors of the less effective posts on your list to make them more appealing to the target audience?
5. If you had to rank these blog posts, what would your ranking look like? Explain your ranking.

Another option to facilitate the comparative analysis of blogs would be providing students with an assessment rubric, which can be created based on dos and don'ts discussed above.

### *Collective Revision*

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As Ferris and Hedgcock (2014) stated, "The exchange of ideas, reactions, criticisms, and opinions is an integral literacy practice" (p. 136). As a class (or in small groups), students can revise a sample blog to make it more appealing to the target audience. The activity would start with an initial analysis that includes identifying the target audience and effective and less effective features of the blog. Then students would brainstorm specific suggestions on how to revise the blog to attract more readers from the targeted category(ies).

## Instructional Articles

### Description

Many people use online “how-to” guides and instructions for various purposes--out of necessity, as part of their career or education, or for personal information. Online “how-to” guides are easily accessible, and users can find multiple instructional formats (e.g., videos, written articles, visual instructions, user manuals) that would fit their needs and expectations. Audience awareness is key in “how-to” instructions; therefore, projects and assignments based on writing an instructional article can help students further develop this abstract rhetorical concept. Teachers can either let students choose the skill they would describe in their instructional articles, or assign specific topics depending on the subject matter, course units and themes, or student majors.

Because writing instructional articles helps students demonstrate their knowledge on a particular subject or area of study, they can be introduced in most college courses. Here are a few examples of instructional articles from various fields of study<sup>2</sup>:

- Business and Finance (How to choose a network marketing company; How to create an online subscription business; How to start investing; How to read a financial report);
- Computers and Electronics (How to clear a flash drive on PC or Mac; How to use Microsoft Publisher; How to connect a laptop to a projector; How to decode binary numbers);
- Health (How to increase walking stamina; How to treat numbness in legs and feet; How to avoid unhealthy health goals; How to do a health assessment);
- Education and Communication (How to take advice; How to keep kids engaged in a remote classroom; How to communicate well with people from other cultures; How to make an open educational resource).

### Scaffolding Activities

#### *Analyzing Textual and Visual Features*

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In order to compose effective instructional articles, students first need to familiarize themselves with linguistic and visual features typical of this particular genre. For example, frequently occurring linguistic features include clear and concise sentences, simple syntactic structures, active voice, imperative mood, and step-by-step descriptions. Also, as supplemental

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<sup>2</sup> Examples of these topics are taken from [wikiHow](https://www.wikihow.com/).

images are a common element of instructional articles, students can speculate on how these visual stepping stones contribute to the intended purpose of these articles. Finally, the overall design of instructional articles (e.g., the use of numbered or bulleted lists and spacing) may contribute to readers' comprehension, which can also be brought to students' attention. To implement this activity in class, teachers would prepare several instructional articles (from "[wikiHow](#)," for instance) and ask students to analyze them both from a textual and a visual point of view.

### *Analyzing Author's Tone*

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Students can also be asked to analyze the tone of instructional articles or the stance that authors take when presenting their instructions. Some questions guiding students through this activity may include:

1. Does the author present themselves as an expert?
2. Is the author aware of the needs of the target audience? What features of the instructions made you believe so?
3. What gaps in skills and knowledge does the author assume on the part of their audience?
4. Does the author avoid patronizing the audience?
5. Are there any other elements that stood out to you in the author's tone (e.g., humor)?

### *Holding a Workshop on Writing Instructional Articles*

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As a preparatory writing step, teachers can hold a hands-on workshop on how to compose instructional articles. Topics covered in the workshop may include: writing concise and clear descriptions, explanations, and definitions; balancing textual and visual information; crafting an effective design for instructional articles; using external sources (if needed) and correctly documenting them; (see Mott-Smith, Tomaš, & Kostka, 2017 for practical ideas and lesson plans on using sources in writing). As part of a practice element of the workshop, students can watch a short instructional video (examples can be found on YouTube) and outline an instructional article based on the video. Such workshops can also include opportunities for peer review.

## **Travel Guides**

### **Description**

Creating a travel guide can be an engaging multimodal project to help students further explore the concept of audience. This project can easily be modified to fit the needs of the class as

well as students' interests and expectations. For example, students can create a travel guide for visitors to their town, thus exploring a whole range of attractions available in the local community, including museums and galleries, performance arts, restaurants and shopping malls, family-friendly attractions, nightlife, and outdoors. Alternatively, students can select one group of tourist attractions (e.g., amusement parks or restaurants and shopping malls), thus narrowing the scope of intended audience (e.g., families, "foodies," or those who enjoy shopping). The multimodal aspect of this genre also offers a range of options--that is, students can create a brochure, a website, or a poster. Finally, working with this genre in a language classroom can promote language development, in accordance with second language socialization theory (Duff, 2010; Duff & Talmy, 2011), by giving students various opportunities to integrate in their local sociocultural communities (Shvidko, 2018).

Similar to other genres described in this paper, travel guides can be introduced in classrooms focusing on different subject areas. Thus, students majoring in engineering, business, architecture, or public health can create travel guides for professionals of their own fields. To illustrate, while creating their travel guide for a particular audience, students would focus on specific points of interest available in their local communities, for example, bridge structure designs, family-owned businesses, local architecture styles, and hospitals, clinics, and medical centers.

## Scaffolding Activities

### *Identifying Components of a Travel Guide*

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To familiarize students with the genre conventions and expand their schematic knowledge (Chen & Graves, 1995; Grabe & Stoller, 2011; Rumelhart, 1980), they can be asked to identify elements that make an effective travel guide. Some such elements relate to linguistic features, rhetorical patterns, design and format, writing style, and multimodal components. Students can do this assignment either in groups or individually.

### *Exploring the Basics of Visual Rhetoric*

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Because composing a travel guide is likely to involve a multimodal component, it is important for students to become familiar with the basic principles of visual rhetoric (Foss, 2005; Hocks, 2003), such as contrast, repetition, alignment, and proximity (e.g., Williams, 2015). Visual elements--images, typography, colors, space, and layout--have a powerful rhetorical influence on the reader, but it may not be easy for students to see these visual systems as logical--i.e., "sometimes a picture is just a picture." To raise students' awareness of the core elements of visual rhetoric, they can be asked to first analyze familiar pieces, such as famous works of art, movie posters, or their own photographs, from the visual rhetoric standpoint, and then apply their knowledge to the analysis of travel guides.

### *Collaborative Peer Review*

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If composing a travel guide is assigned as a group project, collaborative peer review can be implemented during its intermediary stages. For example, two groups can be assigned to work together, and the “evaluating/reviewing” group would take the target audience perspective (e.g., being campus visitors or a group of friends visiting the town) while providing feedback on the work created by the other group. Teachers can facilitate this peer review activity by providing students with a list of guiding questions, some of which may include:

1. Is this travel guide effective from an audience point of view?
2. Is the purpose of this guide likely to be clear to the target audience?
3. How well does the appearance of this guide support its purpose?
4. How are textual components (e.g., linguistic features, rhetorical patterns, writing style) and visual strategies used to communicate to the audience? And to what ends?
5. Based on your feedback, what specific suggestions can you offer to help the authors improve this travel guide?

## **Conclusion**

The examination and use of writing genres such as those described above may help students develop a sense of audience in their writing, as they encourage learners to apply various strategies to visualize and communicate to real audiences in authentic sociocultural environments. The incorporation of these genres can take many forms in the classroom, and teachers can design either single writing assignments or more ambitious course projects varying in scope and complexity.

While a composition classroom or a language course devoted specifically to writing instruction may present the most convenient space for employing these genres, with certain modifications they can be incorporated in other instructional settings, including various university courses, as part of a “writing-to-learn” approach (Bazerman, 2009; Bean, 2011; Carroll, 2002; Smart, Hudd, & Delohery, 2011; Zinsser, 1988). A product review, as mentioned, can be transformed as a review of a website, a software, a book, or another print material. Online blogs, as illustrated previously, can be assigned in different courses to give students the opportunity both to present their knowledge of the subject and to become members of their professional communities of practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991). Similarly, as indicated earlier, students in most college courses can be asked to compose an instructional article to demonstrate their acquisition of the target content. Alternatively, students can be assigned to compose various instructional articles for other students in their own university (e.g., “How to navigate library resources,” “How to prepare for the finals,”) or specifically for

students of the same major, department, or program (e.g., “How to successfully write a course paper in a business management course,” “How to survive the first semester as a freshman in biochemistry”). This approach may promote students’ acquaintance with institutional services and resources and facilitate their socialization in local academic environments (Shvidko, 2018). Finally, as previously mentioned, a travel guide can be crafted for particular audiences as well, such as engineers, business people, architects, or medical workers.

Aside from giving students the opportunity to compose for multiple audiences beyond the classroom, these genres can also prepare them for real-life outside of the institutional settings, particularly after the completion of their academic studies. More specifically, many scaffolding classroom activities presented above can be designed as collaborative activities, in which students not only discuss and exchange ideas while deconstructing textual and visual features of the target genre but also engage in collaborative construction of texts, which, as Ferris and Hedgcock (2014) stated, is “a common educational and professional practice” (p. 119). Additionally, the genres described above promote students’ interaction with real audiences in sociocultural, professional, and academic online spaces, thus positively contributing to their socialization in these digital discourse communities. This, in turn, may gradually increase their legitimate peripheral participation<sup>3</sup> (Lave & Wenger, 1991) until they ultimately become full members of their communities of practice. Educators should strive, therefore, to expand the scope of learning spaces by incorporating writing “in the wild” in their curricula, thus inviting students to participate in authentic educational environments outside the classroom.

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<sup>3</sup> Legitimate peripheral participation is a fundamental concept of Lave and Wenger’s learning theory. Learning, according to Lave and Wenger, “involves the whole person; it implies not only a relation to social communities—it implies becoming a full participant, a member, a kind of person” (Lave & Wenger, 1991, p. 2). Legitimate peripheral participation, therefore, is a process by which newcomers gradually move from their peripheral position in the community toward the center, thus achieving full participation in that community.

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