GENRE CROSS-WRITING: A METHODOLOGY FOR WRITING AS OUR SELVES

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Creative research methods are not prominent in the field of writing studies. I define creative research methods as artistic tools that can be utilized when trying to gain knowledge that brings depth or a new perspective to a topic, knowledge that might not be discovered when using traditional research methods. However, these tools and methods can bring dynamic, unconventional thinking into writing research, including undergraduate research. This paper offers an example based on my own work, which started with a class project that became the pilot for more formalized research. I feature genre cross-writing, a creative method that I first developed as an autoethnographic tool that I used to see how all of my identities worked together. Genre cross-writing also helped me explore the complexities of other people, their identities, and the genres they write. I coupled genre cross-writing with a heuristic designed to assist exploration of the different kinds of identities we embody. I encourage other researchers to consider incorporating creative methods into their work to gain more perspectives on the intricacies research can bring to the surface.

My work started as a semester-long class project for ENGL 3210: Writing Practices and Processes. At the time, I was a lost senior with multiple identities—I was a Soldier, an English major, an Accountant—and I was in need of a journey of self-discovery to see where they met in the middle to create . . . me. I focused my work in the class on all of my identities and the genres they wrote. They interacted in ways I did not expect, and so I decided to retrospectively turn my class project into the pilot for more formal research. That research over the course of a year resulted in genre cross-writing, which is the method I created to explore identities and genres. Genre cross-writing is a creative research method that involves writing across the genres you associate with your different identities.

Prior to formalizing my research, I didn't even know what creative research methods were. I knew what creativity was, and I learned about traditional research methods through various classes and writing center tutor training, but I didn't know where they intersected. I discovered that creative research has particular features that are unique to its practice: "[O]ne of the defining features of creativity in research is that it tends to resist categorical or binary thinking and that creative methods value contextual specificity and are able to reflect the multiplicity of meanings that exist in social contexts more accurately" (van der Vaart et al.). This idea of resisting categorical

restrictions was appealing and applicable to my research which focuses on pushing the boundaries of genres and identities in unconventional ways.

WHAT ARE CREATIVE RESEARCH METHODS?

Creative research methods are as varied as quantitative and qualitative research methods. Creative researchers choose from arts-based methods, technology-based methods, mixed methods, transformative research frameworks, and more. Ultimately, I chose arts-based methods for my project. In Gwenda van der Vaart, Bettina van Hoven, and Paulus P.P. Huigen's article "Creative and Arts-Based Research Methods in Academic Research," they define arts-based research as "any social or human inquiry that adopts the tenets of the creative arts as a part of the methodology . . . during data collection, analysis, interpretation and/or dissemination." In *Creative Research Methods in the Social Sciences: A Practical Guide*, Helen Kara describes a variety of arts-based research, which includes visual and performative arts, creative writing, music, textile arts and crafts, photography, installation art, etc. One of her examples is a researcher who conducted an autoethnographic study using her personal writing and then displayed her findings as mixed-media art (e.g., felting, collage, sculpture) (Kara 155). In another example, researchers collected ethnographies of women and immigrants in precarious jobs; they presented their findings as an ethnodrama in order to make the research accessible to all different types of audiences (Kara 140).

Like these researchers, I was drawn to using arts-based research methods "to ask questions of [my] own conventions and disciplinary practices" (van der Vaart et al.). In my case, I took skills from my artistic repertoire, which includes painting, scrapbooking, scratchboard, drawing, and various string creations like lanyards, and I turned them into arts-based research methods. Through this creativity, I effectively asked questions about my own identities and, ultimately, developed a methodology we can all use to research ourselves.

GENRE CROSS-WRITING

Genre cross-writing is the term I created to describe the kind of experiment I began in my class project. I wanted to see how my disparate identities worked together. Although I was taking an English class and working on an English project, I was also an Accounting major and a Soldier. To start exploring, I listed my identities and the genres I associated with them and then succinctly defined them. Whereas Samuel R. Delany imposed two identities onto one form in *Times Square Red, Times Square Blue*, I completely mixed them up and paired one identity with one form, no form having more than one identity, but each identity being used multiple times. For example, I paired a poem, which I associated with my English/writer identity, with my Soldier identity, and I paired a piece of flash fiction, which I associated with my English/writer identity, with my Accountant identity. Then I tried to write the poem as a Soldier and the flash fiction piece as an Accountant; I also wrote reflections before, during, and after this writing process. I would reflect on what was happening inside my brain and how the writing was coming out on paper.

This procedure was difficult to talk about at first. I didn't have the language to explain what I was doing and how I was doing it. It didn't help that I didn't have words to simply name the process that became my methodology. So, I began reading scholarship, specifically, Carolyn Miller's "Genre as Social Action," Anis Bawarshi's *Genre and The Invention of the Writer,* and *Genre: An Introduction to History,* and *Theory, Research, and Pedagogy* by Anis Bawarshi and Mary Jo Reiff. Miller described genre as "a conventional category of discourse . . . [and] it acquires meaning from situation and from the social context in which that situation arose," which helped me create the categories I then assigned to an individual piece of writing (163). She makes a clear distinction between form and genre, but whereas her idea of form is "the more general term," I reversed the concept, using form as the individual piece that gets sorted into a genre (Miller 163). These works all substantially informed my thinking about the topics and, in many ways, were perfect articulations of my thoughts and ideas about identity and genre.

As I began my formal research through an independent study at the start of my super-senior year, I named my methodology genre cross-writing. To practice genre cross-writing, which is a form of autoethnography, researchers choose one of their identities, then choose a genre that is associated with another one of their identities, and they write in order to make discoveries about themselves and the things they write. Researchers can heighten their experience by adding outside and inside influences. Outside influences relate to identity in some way, such as clothing or a playlist. Inside influences are topics common to the genre. This process allows you—the researcher, writer, or person who practices genre cross-writing—to push the boundaries of the genre you're trying to write, the identity you're writing as, and the identity that you usually associate with the genre you are writing.

In my personal capacity, genre cross-writing was not easy in most cases, and I struggled with the majority of the writing because my identities came from opposite ends of the spectrum. There are significant contrasts between English majors, accountants, writers, soldiers, and writing center tutors, which are highlighted by their writing styles. By formalizing my methodology and utilizing outside and inside influences, I heightened some of the differences between my identities and genres to make the interaction more deliberate. My outside influences were usually an object, a place, music, or clothing. For example, when I wrote as a Soldier, I wore my Army uniform. Inside influences were the topics of what I wrote. Since poetry is emotional, I picked an emotional topic when I wrote a poem; when I wrote an accounting report, I could only include numbers and facts. When forcing opposites together through genre cross-writing, they clashed, and they clashed hard. I generally felt like either the identity or the genre was stronger and tried to "take over" my writing process.

However, everyone's experiences will be different while conducting genre cross-writing. Some people may find that crossing their identities and genres is easier or that the process is challenging in a different way. The reflection portion is absolutely, 100-percent necessary. Without it, you can't get the same in-depth knowledge of how your genres and identities interact and how you respond to putting them together. This knowledge is valuable in part

because it is complicated and even contradictory. It teaches you the boundaries and rules of both your identities and genres. But it also teaches you flexibility and how those boundaries can be pushed, and it makes it possible to see both identity and genre in new ways.

ADDITIONAL CREATIVE METHODS I USED

Although genre cross-writing was my main method, I complemented it with other creative methods for collecting and understanding data as well as presenting my research. The first is a heuristic method that takes the form of a multipurpose worksheet I created to prepare people for genre cross-writing. It asks four questions, two related to identity and two related to genre:

1. Write down two of the identities or roles you play that involve writing. Try to pick two that aren't very similar to each other.

	A. Identity A	B. Identity B
1. Write down two of the identities or roles you play that involve writing. Try to pick two that aren't very similar to each other.		
2. Write down 5 words you associate with each identity or role. Those words might describe how you feel about that role, characteristics of that role, or what you are trying to accomplish in that role.		
3. List at least one specific kind of writing you do in relation to each role. For example, if you are a supervisor, you might write employee reviews. If you help manage a lab, you might write incident reports. If you are a poet, you might be writing a lot of free form poetry these days. And so on.		
4. List 5 words that describe each kind of writing. You can list words related to how you feel about each kind of writing, words related to what each is for, the style of writing (elaborate, descriptive, cut-and-dry), and so on.		

Figure 1: Worksheet

2. Write down five words you associate with each identity or role. Those words might describe how you feel about that role, characteristics of that role, or what you are trying to accomplish in that role.

3. List at least one specific kind of writing you do in relation to each role. For example, if you are a supervisor, you might write employee reviews. If you help manage a lab, you might write incident reports. If you are a poet, you might be writing a lot of free form poetry these days. And so on.

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how you feel about each kind of writing, what each is for, the style of writing (elaborate, descriptive, cut-and-dry), and so on.

These questions prime the user to think about their own identities and genres in a concrete way. I originally designed the worksheet for IRB-approved interviews and ended up using it myself. I also used it to conduct workshops for subsequent sections of ENGL: 3210.

The next method, a string board, allowed me to visually represent the crossings of my identities and genres. The board itself was a whiteboard that was roughly three feet tall and four feet long. On it, there were four pieces of printer paper, three of them worksheets
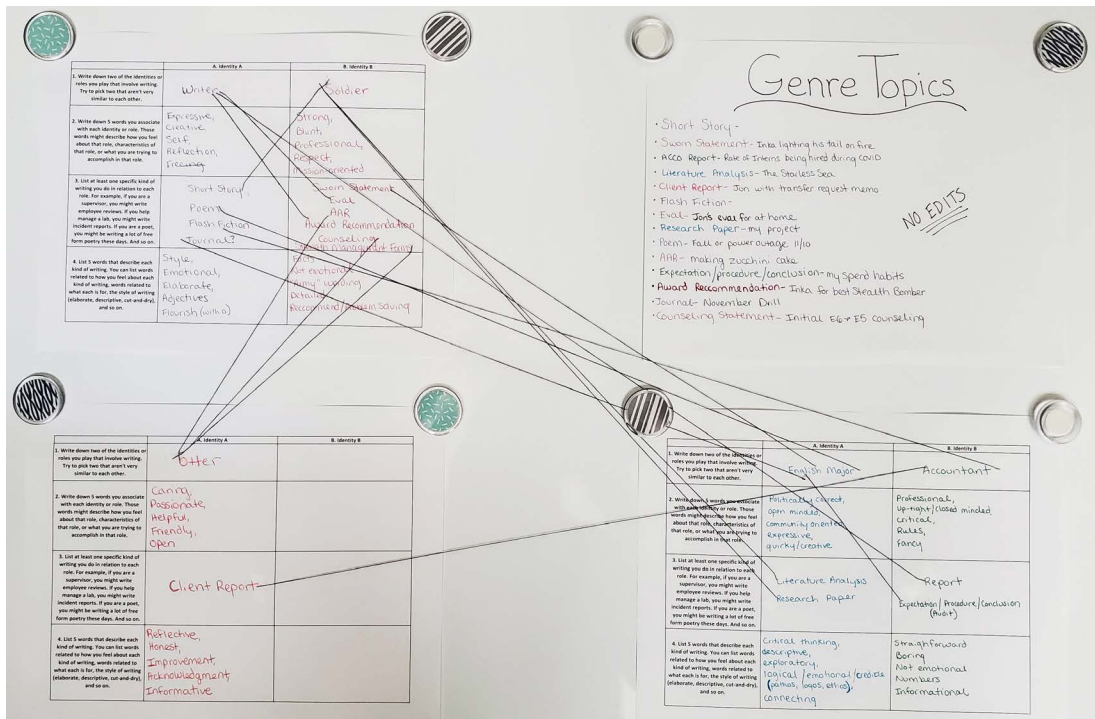

Figure 2: String Board

and one listing the topics I was going to write about. These pieces were stacked in a two-inch square with roughly equal space on each side of the paper. The worksheets I filled out with my identities and genres and had pieces of string connecting each identity to whichever genre I was going to write. Showing the pairings in this way allowed me and the viewer to see and experience all of my identities and genres simultaneously and in relation to each other. Defying the linear logic of a list, this approach is more holistic and more complex, and, as such, it is a better representation of me.

Since traditional methods didn't help me capture the full expression of my creativity, I continued to use non-traditional formats to not only present my work but also to offer an extension of the project, giving readers the chance to see another meaning, another perspective, or to see something they might not have realized before. The first is an interactive scrapbook that I call Create-a-Book. The Create-a-Book is not meant to be a stand-alone final product, but rather, it is meant to be seen in relation to the rest of the work done, very much like the ballet shoes that held a transcription of a research-based essay discussed in Jody Shipka's book *Toward a Composition Made Whole.* I made it to share the writings and reflections I did during my genre cross-writing as well as the items I used like the string board and the worksheets. The book covers the project's highlights in their final form, meaning it doesn't cover much of the processes, mostly just the end result. Colorful pages invite the reader to open, unfold,
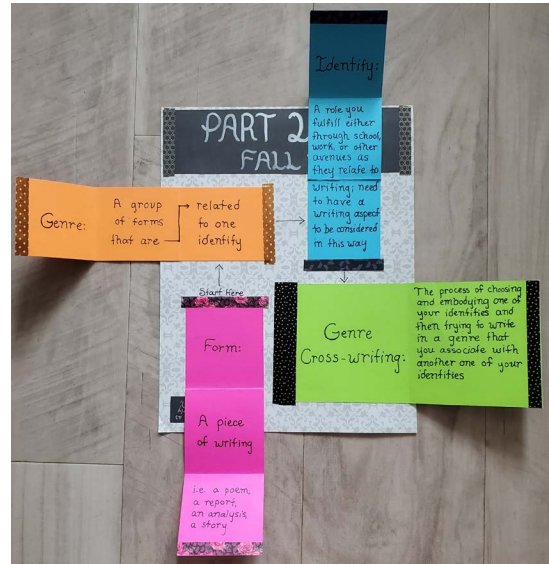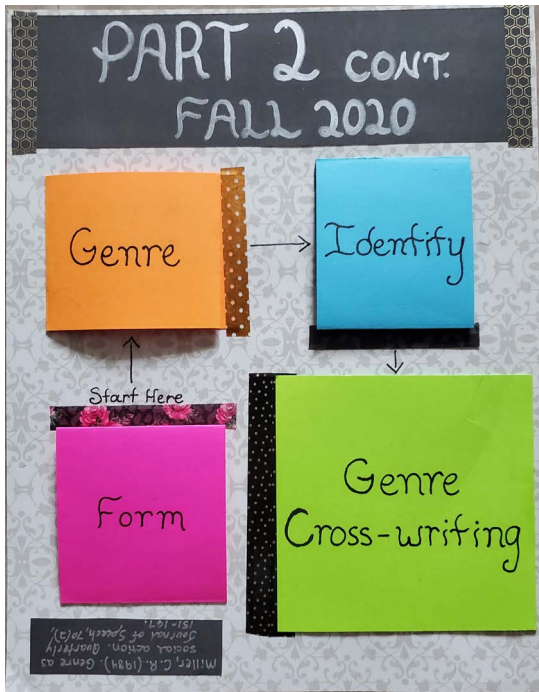
Figures 3 & 4: Create-a-Book Closed & Create-a-Book Open

untie, turn upside down and sideways to experience and explore my work. The book doesn't require it to be read from front to back; the reader could start in the middle or at the end.

Second, I made a website for the 2021 Conference on College Composition and Communication's Undergraduate Researcher Poster Session (https://collegeidentitiesandgenres.wordpress.com/). I deliberately designed the site and its navigation to be interactive to capture the nonlinearity and complexity of identity and genre. The site allowed unlimited space, so I was able to add as much detail as I wanted and go in-depth on my processes. The landing page offers an overall project bio, including summaries of the class project, my formal research portion, and the definitions I used. The next two sections, titled "Writing" and "Book," respectively, discuss the writing pieces and reflections and the Create-a-Book. A section called "Try This!" invites users to download and try the worksheet. The final two sections are my artist's statement, titled "Creator," and my contact information. The site captured the entirety and essence of my project.

CONCLUSION

I created genre cross-writing almost by accident, but as I worked with it, I learned it was a good tool for self-discovery. As a creative methodology, it can be used to study identities and genres in various capacities. First and foremost, it is an ethnomethodology, which means writers can use it for self-study to learn more about their own identities and genres. Genre cross-writing can also be used in conjunction with the worksheet in larger groups, including not only classes but also writing groups, any pre-professional groups such as pre-law, or even high school-to-college transition groups. Genre cross-writing can help someone problem solve; maybe they're struggling with how to bring their voice into a genre that typically isn't very freeform. They can use it if they're like me and feel lost, and they just want to know how the different pieces of themselves fit together. This tool is whatever you need it to be—it is as open-ended as we are.

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