

Composing comes alive: Dramatic presentations in the writing classroom

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Abstract: In creating and presenting a collaborative dramatic presentation of a literary text, composition students bring “The Yellow Wallpaper” to life through close reading, literary analysis and synthesis, recursive multi-modal writing, and group performance. This assignment fosters the development of transferrable reading, writing, and creative thinking skills within an active learning environment.

The young woman paces at the front of the classroom, the exterior of a grand Victorian house projected onto the whiteboard behind her. She sits down at the instructor’s desk and begins writing in the journal resting upon it, speaking quietly in time with her moving pen. After a few moments, she pauses, tilts her ear toward the door, and tucks the book and pen under a newspaper, nervously greeting her male classmate as he enters with a confident gait. He scans the desk, catches sight of a corner of the journal and of the woman’s ink-stained fingers, and scolds her for writing. As her body curls inward and she apologizes, his tone softens. Referring to her as his little squirrel, he reminds her that he is doing his best to take care of her, but she will not get better if she disobeys his instructions.

Thus began a group dramatization of Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s 1892 short story “The Yellow Wallpaper” in my recent English composition class (Gilman, 1892/2014). The dramatization progressed with the woman pulling out her journal every time her classmate-husband stepped out of the room, her frustration visibly growing. As the projected scrim changed to a yellow floral pattern, the woman began tearing at the whiteboard-turned-wallpaper until another student, adorned in yellow, mimed stepping out of the paper and struggled, hand to hand, with the original student. By the end of the dramatization, the woman from the wallpaper had knocked the protagonist down

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and was crawling along the wall. The student playing the husband then burst through the closed door, looked aghast at the crawling woman, and fell to the classroom floor.

The class erupted in applause as the performers stood and took a bow. They explained to the class that they wanted to convey that the husband in the story treated his wife like a child, stifling her expression, to the point that she saw a woman, her alter ego, in the wallpaper. They depicted the narrator physically struggling with the woman as a projection of a wilder, stronger side of herself, a side that could not be defeated. In their representation, that version of the woman kills the more docile wife, leaving the husband unable to recognize the crawling woman.

Engaging with the Text through Performance

I began assigning group dramatizations such as this one in my composition classes several years ago at the suggestion of a friend with whom I had led many Writing Across the Curriculum faculty workshops while in graduate school. In a brief exchange over social media, we recalled the creative approaches to presentations that we urged instructors from various disciplines to try—but this time I was the instructor looking for a fresh lesson plan.

Immediately drawn to my friend’s idea of inviting students into Gilman’s story, a text which past students had found intriguing yet difficult, I devoted a class period to impromptu group dramatizations and watched in delight as students interpreted the female protagonist’s visions of a woman lurking within her bedroom’s hideous wallcovering.

In that early iteration, students enjoyed enacting the narrator’s secretive journaling and growing paranoia, bringing the woman in the wallpaper to life, exaggerating the patronizing husband who, in the final scene of the story, faints at the sight of his wife after she has torn the paper, strip by strip, off the walls. They worked in groups of four or five to pose key questions about the text that they needed to clarify for themselves, such as: Who is the woman in the wallpaper? Does the narrator free herself by tearing the paper off the walls? Why is the husband so surprised at the end? To answer the questions, they reread together and agreed upon a plausible interpretation. Groups then planned a five- to ten-minute dramatization, incorporating lines from Gilman into their scripts. These students, who had disclosed that they did not enjoy reading and had struggled to visualize Gilman’s story, quickly became invested in this project, better understanding the narrative in the process.

Over time, recognizing a larger array of valuable learning outcomes in this activity, I have developed the dramatic reading—not only of literary texts, but, in other classes, of opinion pieces, documentary films, and creative essays—into a major assignment that involves close reading, literary analysis and synthesis, collaborative writing and reflection, and culminates in performance and discussion. Students work together, over several class sessions, on several written components, from taking and compiling notes, to composing their script and reflective essay. More than just an engaging class exercise, this

multi-faceted assignment immerses students in a project that is collaborative, creative, and, most notably, truly nonlinear. Indeed, working in groups, students adopt a recursive composing process that it often takes more practiced writers years to develop.

Composing as Process: Recursive, Layered, and Collaborative

I teach at an urban public university where each year approximately 75% of first-year students are deemed underprepared for college-level reading and writing, even as they all must engage with college-level readings and assignments in their composition classes. Aware that many of our students are not avid or confident readers, I rely in my classes upon active and collaborative learning strategies that help students understand course material. (Community College Baltimore County's Accelerated Learning Program website, a repository of ALP program models and active learning classroom resources, provides useful examples.) Indeed, complex ideas and challenging texts are demystified when students, at any level, are given the time and tools to ask questions and develop critical thinking processes.

To that end, I allow ample time for my English 102 students to work with "The Yellow Wallpaper." They spend several class sessions weaving between textual analysis, collaborative composing, performance, and reflection, with the following steps listed on my assignment sheet:

- read together to agree upon a compelling focus;
- determine the necessary narrative elements and draft the script;
- plan the staging, props, and audio-visual components; and
- rehearse, finetune the script, and write the reflective essay.

Students analyze the text together, selecting a central theme and analysis for their performance. As they draft their script, they debate what to include, where to begin and end, and how to present their interpretation. They engage again in close reading, analyzing word choices, meaning, and tone, and returning to the text as they write. Working collaboratively, they debate their choices until they reach consensus. As they work, they take notes on their decisions, drafting the accompanying essay in tandem with the script, in a process of selection and commentary strikingly similar to that of keeping a double entry notebook (a technique in which a reader takes notes and simultaneously—in an adjacent column—reflects on and analyzes the material recorded).

Although I have broken the assignment into discrete pieces, students soon realize that each element is dependent upon the other. For instance, students must agree upon which scenes and characters to include as they determine audio-visual components, yet the selection of set pieces and props might lead them to adjust their script. Thus, though group members divvy up tasks in creating a cohesive dramatization, they must continually look to each other, as well as back and ahead, to ensure analytical, narrative and performative cohesion. To assist students as they navigate an unfamiliar genre, I

provide sample play scripts as models, discussing the necessary formal components and layout; however, this is not a playwriting class, so I prioritize evidence of analytical thinking, a reflective writing process, and creativity in my review of their work.

This project involves multiple elements and people, yet it is highly achievable. Students who felt lost reading the text on their own soon feel the excitement of the creative process. Similarly, those comfortable with traditional literary analysis usually come to enjoy the flexible play of this approach. Together they take pride in their innovative choices for dialogue, props, and staging and are eager to perform for their classmates. In short, they project a true love of learning in all of its messy glory.

All in One: Active, Collaborative, Multimodal, Creative Learning

Active learning is far from a new pedagogical concept reserved for developmental students. Indeed, nearly thirty years ago in *Active Learning: Creating Excitement in the Classroom*, Bonwell and Eison (1991) affirmed that active teaching “involving students in doing things and thinking about what they are doing” (p. iii) is more effective than lecturing for several reasons: students enjoy being actively engaged during class time; such engagement leads to improved critical thinking and reading skills; and a wider range of students is served by pedagogy that does not rely on lecture.

Over time, educators have implemented active learning in countless ways, from innovative scaffolding activities to student-directed classrooms. The core measure of successful active learning is the degree to which it sparks higher-level thinking, leading to synthesis and reflection. In their dramatic presentations, my students do not stop at literary analysis and performance; they discuss their choices in accompanying essays and with their classmates, drawing upon multiple skills while preparing their presentations.

With the explosion of technologically diverse forms of communication, many composition instructors have recently expanded the concept of active learning, developing innovative multimodal instructional methods and assignments. And though technology offers vital layering of information and forms of connectivity for teaching, multimodality can be achieved in low-tech ways, such as through scripting dialogue. As Kubler (2015) states, “all literacy processes (writing and reading/viewing) are inherently multisensory, multimodal, and collaborative” (p. 323), yet he argues that what is often forgotten in today’s digitally-focused, multimodal composition classroom is the element of collaboration.

Indeed, the value of collaboration is crucial, as many of the vulnerabilities of underprepared composition students are offset when social interaction and interdependent activities are emphasized in the classroom. The challenge, though, is providing guidance that helps students lay out roles and tasks, as well as manage conflicts (Burke, 2011). However, the multiple layers of this assignment, as I lay them out, ensure that no one student carries the weight of their group’s project, and in confidential end-of-project surveys, students confirm that almost all members contribute in meaningful ways. Further, I have

noticed that anxious and reserved students seem to feel more at ease working within the protection of an active group.

The value of cooperative and active learning increases further when students are also allowed to break away from the confines of traditional academic forms. On a practical level, students who are trained in multimodal writing will develop flexible communication skills suited for the digital world. Critical analytical skills developed through an engaging performative assignment can be adapted and applied to multiple writing modes, whether a blog, a podcast, or a research paper. The value of such flexibility cannot be downplayed in a world in which the modes and platforms of communication are constantly changing.

One of the notable benefits of this project is, to use Shannon Carter's term (as cited in Sullivan, 2015), rhetorical dexterity, or ability to present an argument in a variety of ways for different imagined audiences. This skill, as Sullivan argues, "may be especially crucial for writers with only an emerging understanding of academic writing" (p. 20). In the dramatic assignment, students exercise rhetorical flexibility as they move beyond the traditional teacher-focused essay form to a creative project in which conveying meaning about the text to an audience holds primary importance.

Transferable and Recursive: Developing Long-Term Writing Habits

If one of the hallmarks of a successful assignment is a high rate of transferable skills, then this one hits the mark. Sullivan's (2015) work on creativity attests that intellectual and practical skills transfer from innovative activities to more traditional ones (p. 14), as does Wardle's (2007) finding that students transfer—or, to use her language, generalize—more readily when an assignment is "engaging" (p. 82). However, skills transfer is not an automatic process, so Wardle argues "that *meta-awareness about writing, language, and rhetorical strategies* in FYC may be the most important ability our courses can cultivate" (p. 82). For that reason, I point to specific skills that students have already mastered. For instance, as they compose traditional evidence-based essays, I remind students that they learned to locate relevant quotations as they composed their scripts, thus developing a critical skill for college writing. With such reinforcement, the abilities that students build through their dramatic presentations are more likely to stay with them, and, as they reflect upon the skills employed, their long-term confidence in working with texts increases.

I have found that a significant, yet subtle and often new, skill my students hone in this project is that of composing recursively, moving between what is already on the page and what is to come next. In her foundational study on the composing process, Perl (1980) argues that all writers circle back in this manner, but the most adept writers return to what they have already composed with greater frequency than those who struggle. Although composition pedagogy and theory have evolved greatly in the past few decades, I see that my students hold onto fixed notions of writing as a linear activity, enacted in the same order the final product must appear on the page. They believe they should write straight through, from introduction to end, usually five paragraphs later.

I notice that my students may resist the notion of moving back and forth, of reviewing what has been written in order to move forward—and over two decades teaching composition, I have found it a difficult skill to teach. However, linear impulses are quietly thwarted by the multi-layered presentation assignment; despite the potential desire to progress in a linear fashion through the steps laid out in the prompt, students move back and forth, from text to script to essay, without even realizing it. For as they imagine the script, they must turn back to the text for evidence and clarification, and then to their essays to reflect on their decisions. No one element can develop without the other.

The process is unruly for students unaccustomed to the circular movement of engaged writing, but there is power in numbers. I might see a group clustered together, one student holding the primary text in his lap, scouring it for passages, while a pair is at a desktop with the script-in-progress open, and two more share a laptop, making notes for their accompanying essay. They are composing together, and they are also composing recursively, learning the value of circling back, from one document to the next, as they progress. If I could impart one bit of wisdom to my students, it would be that rich, thoughtful writing does not methodically appear on the page, word after steady word. The composing process is lively and engaged; writers must remain interested in what they have already written—and flexible enough to adapt it—as they move forward.

Presenting Beyond the Composition Classroom

Without losing any of its benefits, the dramatic presentation can be assigned beyond the composition or literature class for analysis of nonliterary texts and images, including pieces on current social issues. For instance, I have had success with dramatizations of materials from a variety of genres on systemic racism or xenophobia, as well as historiographic pieces on the civil rights movement from the 1960s. I can imagine even broader applications that enable students to imagine scientific or mathematical processes and more. In fact, such applications could push students to interrogate the impact of rhetoric and representation in STEM fields where words and meanings shape understanding in subtle, often unexamined ways.

When students are asked to analyze closely at the level of word choice (or perhaps, data point) for this assignment, they must think about how to represent the information before them in a dramatic mode. The recursive work of moving between the original text and the interpretative creation of the script, while reflecting on and explaining each choice, fosters nuanced reading and critical thinking skills that are valuable in any discipline. As students work together, shifting fluidly from primary text to student script, to staged presentation, to written reflection, instructors might facilitate class discussions on analytical and interpretative processes as recursive, creative, and multi-layered.

With the freedom to work creatively and collaboratively, students adopt reading, thinking, composing habits easily, without the anxiety that an essay elicits. They almost intuitively consider word choice, tone, and evidence—all skills we value in composition—as they prepare their presentations. I do not need to teach that an evocative mood can be created

through low lighting and an unsettling image projected on the classroom wall. They already know that. And they already know the effectiveness of an ominous soundtrack, or of a deliberate entry, or of a powerful line of dialogue. The creative ways that my students, working together, have brought to life their interpretations of “The Yellow Wallpaper” over the past few years have left me in awe time and time again. Indeed, through their innovative performances, my faith that students who struggle to compose traditional essays are by no means incapable of college level thinking and writing is continually reaffirmed. Even the least confident students can find their voices in the composition classroom; all they need is a different point of entry.

Assignment: “The Yellow Wallpaper” Dramatic Presentation Assignment for English Comp 102 ALP

See the Supplementary Files for this article at thepromptjournal.com for a PDF facsimile of the original formatting of this assignment.

You will work in groups for this dramatic presentation assignment, which means you must work together to 1) analyze “The Yellow Wallpaper,” 2) write a script, 3) write an accompanying essay, 4) plan the staging of the presentation, and 5) perform your dramatic reading.

1. First, as a group you must discuss and agree upon a particular interpretation or angle on the story that you would like to present. For instance, you may have an interesting take on the husband/wife relationship in the story, or on the narrator as a mother, or on the woman in the wallpaper as the narrator’s double. Your focus and angle of analysis is up to you, as a group, to decide. But you must decide that first, so that you may reread the story together for insights into your focus and begin planning how to *present* the story in such a way that your focus is highlighted.
2. Once you have found a focus, think back to our class work on the elements of the story (setting, characterization, plot & structure, narrator & point of view, conflict, climax, and theme). You will not be able to exactly duplicate each of these elements in your dramatic presentation, so consider how you want to handle each element. Which elements of the story would showcase your analysis? Which characters do you need? Which parts of the text? Are there pieces you need to add? Perhaps a narrator, or voice over reader. Or maybe you would like to present the story with dialogue: Who will speak? And what will they say? Imagine three or four scenes or moments that you will present, and work together to draft a script.
3. Determine your staging of the presentation. Where will the actors be in each scene: will they be moving or stationary, and what will they be doing? What props and audio-visual materials, if any, do you need? You may use anything in the room, including the computer, projector, and whiteboard, and you may rearrange any easily movable furniture. Plus you may bring in anything from home that you like.

4. Rehearse, rehearse, rehearse! Prepare to present your dramatic reading to the class on the designated day. You must also submit your accompanying essay and script that day.

Accompanying Essay and Script

As a group, please draft a two-page paper that explains your group’s analysis of the story. Be sure to discuss:

- what elements or questions you focused on
- what your “reading” or interpretation of the story is
- why you chose to have the characters that you included
- how / why you decided how to approach the script (for instance, using dialogue that your group wrote vs. pulling passages from the story for the narrator to read aloud, and so on)
- why you included the props and staging that you chose

Your presentation should be approximately 10 minutes long, followed by a discussion of the information in your accompanying essay. ALL members of your group must participate in the dramatic presentation itself.

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