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Reflecting with Zines: A Multimodal Alternative to the Final Reflective Essay

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Overview

While reflective writing assignments can be an excellent way to have students look back on a past term and ask how their writing has grown, these assignments can also be challenging for both teachers and students. Often these projects come at the end of a term when students may feel the stress of finals, lack of time, or may simply be burnt out. This results in reflective essays which are summaries of their work or written in a way that the student *thinks* the instructor wants them to write. Shifting to a multimodal assignment can be a helpful way to get out of this rut, because it requires the student to think differently about how they can represent what they've learned and approach composing with renewed energy. In this assignment, students compose zines to reflect on their experience in the first-year writing classroom. As a DIY, flexible genre, zines are an ideal assignment for challenging students to make their own decisions as writers and to be inventive with the way they represent their ideas.

As noted by Pamela Takayoshi and Cynthia L. Selfe, students often respond to multimodal assignments with excitement and find them refreshing and meaningful (4). In my experience, reflecting with zines does just that. In this assignment students are not only tasked with meeting the general goals of a reflective final essay (for example: identifying themes or growths in their writing, reflecting on lessons learned), but are also encouraged to be intentional with their composing choices. Unlike standard text-based essays, zines are more open-ended, requiring students to intentionally make their own

decisions on length, format, and materials. While this can be challenging, many students have noted that the option to work with physical paper made their work easier and relaxing because it didn't "feel" like work and gave them a break from screens. Overall, the assignment accomplishes the learning outcomes of a final reflective essay but with new challenges of multimodality.

Time Commitment

Approximately two weeks, including at least one class session.

Materials

The most minimal physical zines (including those made in the mini workshop) will require paper, writing utensils, and scissors although most will find magazines or other scrap paper, markers, and glue or tape to be helpful. For digital zines students will need access to software which will allow for basic collage functions such as Canva, InDesign or even Microsoft Word. This project lends itself to a lot of potential formats and materials, so it is best to encourage students to think rhetorically about what each format or material offers them.

Reflective Zine Process

- Students first begin on their own with reading "[Reflective Writing](#)" by Sandra Giles followed by a reading response. The reading response asks students to consider the goals of reflective writing as a method for critically engaging with their own writing or as Giles puts it, to shift from saying "certain things" and instead "think in certain ways" (202).
- Next, students are introduced to zines through a guided activity. This activity asks students to read two zines: (1) [An Introduction to Zines \(and Zine-Making\)](#) and (2) [A Zine on Zines](#). Students are asked to reflect on the purpose of each zine, how they differ in their composing choices, and how

these differences affect their interaction with the zines. The goal of this activity is to introduce students to zines as genres and to help them gain an understanding of the rhetorical impact of design choices in multimodal texts.

- Next, students explore various zine examples including both physical zines (if local archives or examples are available) and digital exhibits. This step can be completed asynchronously or can be combined with the following step (mini-zine workshop) depending on time and resource availability. See further readings at the end of this document for some examples of digital resources.
- Then, students participate in a mini-zine workshop in class. To begin the workshop, students review concepts related to reflective writing and the multimodal affordances of zines. To gain hands-on experience with these concepts they practice making “mini zines” which reflect on one concept or theme they’ve identified in their writing that term.
- Finally, students work independently to create their own zine with an informal 500–1000-word author’s memo explaining their choices.

Learning Outcomes

Students engaging in this assignment will:

- Engage in reflection as a method of critical thinking
- Understand zines as a dynamic genre which utilizes intentional, multimodal design choices depending on audience and purpose
- Experiment with new, multimodal processes, materials, and methods of composing

- Demonstrate intentionality and agency in their decision-making through their composing choices and ability to explain them

Learning Accommodations

- In the two guided reading activities, students can be given the option to respond to readings in various modes (such as text or audio responses).
- Students should be allowed to choose different methods of composing (physical or digital) and materials based on their needs and resources. Students should be given examples of low/no cost materials and resources available to them.
- Materials (such as zine examples) should be presented in multiple formats to include in-person instruction and asynchronous, digital delivery. If students are exploring zines offsite (such as an archive or community space), alternative participation should be provided.
- It should be clearly communicated to students that zine assessment will be based on their demonstration of learning goals, not the novelty or artistic skill showcased in their design.

Works Cited

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Further Reading

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