After reviewing the past ten years of \textit{TETYC}'s “What Works for Me,” I claim these pieces offer writing instructors much more than mere teaching tips; rather, they evidence a genre in a fraught relationship to academic discourse, a genre that asks readers to consider how the ways we write the classroom affect composition as a field, our teacherly selves, and the students in our classrooms.

\textit{Teaching English in the Two-Year College}'s series “What Works for Me” is a unique artifact in the development of composition as a field. Indeed, neither of the other flagship journals concerned with the college-level writing instruction—\textit{College Composition and Communication} and \textit{College English}—currently publishes anything like it. Significantly, \textit{CCC} used to publish “Staffroom Interchange,” which began as short pieces akin to “What Works for Me” and over time, writes former \textit{CCC} editor Richard C. Gebhardt in an editorial, “evolved—in response to the sort of articles authors were submitting—to include ‘fuller essays of application, speculation, and introspection’ as well as the short, classroom pieces it long has carried” (9). “Staffroom Interchange” morphed from descriptions of classroom activities to be more along the lines of \textit{TETYC}'s current instantiation of an “Instructional Note,” which \textit{TETYC} dubs as “short articles.” Although in her \textit{CCC} editorials previous editor Deborah H. Holdstein appeared amenable to resurrecting the genre, “Staffroom Interchange” is now noticeably absent in \textit{CCC}, with the last few published in the early 1990s. Yes, other outlets do publish pieces similar to “What Works for Me”—such as Maryellen Weimer’s “The Teaching Professor Blog”—but within our field’s leading journals today, “What Works for Me” stands on its own as the sole series offering practical, praxis-oriented pieces.

I suspect the relative dearth of pieces and genres like “What Works for Me” in our current scholarship is not unconnected from composition’s efforts to define its concerns as larger than a service course, to do more than the heavy lifting of the undergraduate curriculum. As our discipline drives toward abstraction and theory, a straightforward genre such as “What Works for Me” drifts to the margins, as it can easily fall to a critique that such writing is a decontextualized representation of the classroom. Compared to other narratives of teaching (for instance, William Coles’s
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The Plural I, which devotes a chapter to each and every meeting of a semester-long composition course), the 200–750 words of a “What Works for Me” do seem a bit brief to offer much pedagogical inquiry. But length alone is not the only issue. Richard H. Haswell and Min-Zhan Lu’s 2000 edited collection CompTales includes many pieces of similar length to a “What Works for Me,” and contrasting CompTales’ confessional tone (perhaps due to its anonymous pieces—the most engaging to read in the collection) against the pedagogical successes of “What Works for Me” foregrounds the Pollyannish tendencies of the latter.

Reductive representations of teaching have recently come under fire, and rightfully so. Ken Bain’s 2004 What the Best College Teachers Do argues that teaching is more than technique alone, more than simple “teaching tips” to be applied in the classroom (174–75). His critique is echoed in the pages of TETYC, with Kinsey McKinney admitting she “dread[s] the faculty-lounge conversations” for their oversimplification of teaching (“On Reflecting” 21). In an article building on McKinney’s work and advocating for more “messy” discussions of teaching, Heidi L. Johnsen, Michelle Pacht, Phyllis van Slyck, and Ting Man Tsao lament, “We more often than not represent our teaching in the best possible light, leaving little room for missteps—for the acknowledgment and discussion of uncertainty or errors” (119). Responding to Johnsen et al., McKinney asserts, “only sharing best practices and presenting ourselves as all-knowing isn’t getting our scholarship or ourselves or students where we, and they, could be” (“Oprah” 138). Though not concerning “What Works for Me” specifically, McKinney’s and Johnsen et al.’s comments can be leveled at the series, which could be read as “eschew[ing] the unexpected, messy, and slippery process through which our classes unfold in favor of clean solutions, well-designed lessons, and so-called ‘best practices’” (Johnsen et al. 120).

Although a useful corrective, these critiques are perhaps too easy. They miss the value that “teaching tips” have, value easily overlooked when such representations of teaching are (ironically enough) reductively read themselves. “What Works for Me” falls under the umbrella of what TETYC editor Jeff Sommers calls a “‘true account’ of teaching,” “narratives [that] have been shaped in pursuit of an argument or a point” (“Based” 245). That many representations of teaching are tidied up before being shared hardly precludes them from sustained pedagogical inquiry. Indeed, as Mariolina Rizzi Salvatori argues, the anecdotal, if considered critically, “can provide texts that may be profitably unpacked and discussed in terms of the assumptions they reveal about the nature and function of teaching” (305). Narrative opens up avenues for inquiry about how instructors write the classroom, which, I suggest, has large implications for how composition stakes its position within the academy.

In this article, I claim “What Works for Me” as a valuable genre, a hybrid of new and old disciplinary forms. In the spirit of Derek N. Mueller’s “Views from a Distance: A Nephological Model of the CCCC Chairs’ Addresses, 1977–2011” and Mark Blaauw-Hara’s “Mapping the Frontier: A Survey of Twenty Years of Grammar Articles in TETYC”—both insightful pieces longitudinally examining a scholastic corpus—I take up the past ten years of “What Works for Me,” 66 pieces written by 56 authors.1 Building my analysis of the genre around its titular key words, I begin
with the “What” of a “What Works for Me,” looking to what lessons and exercises these pieces propose, ferreting out how the genre fits in relation to “teaching tips.” I then move to the “Works”—the titular verb of a “What Works for Me”—to examine the act of writing the classroom into our public conversations concerning teaching. I close with the “for Me” of a “What Works for Me,” reflecting upon what the rhetorical and discursive moves we use to represent the classroom mean not only for me as an individual teacher, but also for all of us in the classroom, both teachers and students of writing. A genre at odds with the discourse dominating and defining composition as a field, “What Works for Me” has great potential to reframe how we write, conceive, and think of classrooms, pedagogy, teachers, students, and academic discourse itself.

The “What” of a “What Works for Me”

As readers of the genre know well, part of the joy in “What Works for Me” is the sundry assortment of topics addressed in the pieces, a smorgasbord of possible lessons awaiting readers. Yet amid the prewriting exercises facilitated by Lego building blocks (Christopher; Rhodes), amid the dialects (Hayes), amid the logical fallacies (Johnston), amid the individualized education programs (Yin), amid the peer review workshops (Palmerino), amid the descriptive writing exercises (Santos), revision strategies (Henning), and suggestions for responding to student writing (Bell; Borrowman “Grading”)—amid all these disparate exercises, there are noticeable trends. What to do on the first day of class is a frequent topic, as are reading comprehension, working with sources, and grammar, editing, and syntax.2

The largest trend by far, a trend that transcends the ostensible subject matter of “What Works for Me” pieces, is a drive toward engagement. Engagement takes many forms in “What Works for Me”; for H. Elizabeth Smith, it is when “students take responsibility for their learning” (403), a similar agency described by Brian Hall, whose students “begin to understand how to fix their own mistakes” (304). H. B. Ussach writes of an “interactive” assignment (434). John Parbst seeks “more student preparation and participation” (74). What works for Maria Shine Stewart is “another class full of more active and engaged readers” (78), and Dorothy Minor is quite explicit in her aims—“I want to engage the students”—and her first-day “activity sets the tone for student involvement and participation” for the rest of the term (84). For other writers, engagement manifests itself as fun in the classroom: Eric Bateman speaks of the “fun” of his pedagogy centered around Raymond Queneau’s quirky *Exercises in Style* (81), Suanna H. Davis claims her approach to website evaluation is “a lot of fun” (308), and Rita Pourteau offers “a way to teach grammar . . . that is fun for my students and me” (75). Engagement appears too in flight metaphors: Kathleen Anne Weinberg’s “students ‘take off’; they soar” as they “participate with enthusiasm” (86), and James Andrew Freeman’s “students fly on their own” (80). This litany is by no means exhaustive, but it illustrates, briefly, how prevalently engagement factors into “What Works for Me” pieces.

That so many pieces work toward engagement suggests engaging students is
a perennial struggle for teachers. And for that matter, whatever topic a “What Works for Me” piece takes up, it is doing so because of some struggle, because something is not working in the classroom. This consternation manifests itself prominently in the opening sentences of “What Works for Me” pieces, wherein a problem and a solution are laid out. Dana Elder’s “Motives” does it in its first four sentences, and Marsha Rutter uses her first sentence to state the problem and her second the solution (as does Eric Bateman). Kathleen Anne Weinberg stretches the framing of a problem and solution over six paragraphs. In contrast, this preliminary work can also be in a single sentence: “One way to encourage students to come to class on time”—a problem, Marian Beaman tells us, whose solution—“is to add a humorous twist to the issue of punctuality” (206).

The pedagogical struggle also appears, though more subtly, in the content of “What Works for Me” pieces. For instance, in “Motives,” which describes a prompt asking students to write what motivates them, Dana Elder admits, “Somewhere along the line I’ve learned to ask students to tell the truth, and I alert them that I would never be so presumptuous as to ‘grade’ them on their motives. I ask further for no inappropriate self-disclosure” (79). Given the length restrictions of “What Works for Me,” it is not feasible in his 224-word piece for Elder to offer sustained inquiry into his motivation for revising his assignment. But he alludes to it. Janet M. Lucas is another “What Works for Me” author demonstrating the working through of pedagogical struggle, as she describes a public speaking assignment that failed in its initial iteration: “When I first used this activity in class (sans analysis), I quickly discovered that most of the presentations never rose above the personal” (93). Lucas then details how she incorporated analysis into later, and more successful, versions of the assignment. Lucas does not have room in her short piece to explain how she came to her realization or to describe the other activities she may have tried, but she, like Elder, nods in that direction. Perhaps the most obvious example of this pedagogical struggle, this reflectiveness on crafting a better class, is Rob Wallace’s narration of a lesson that fell flat, “Seeing Red,” a piece written in response to Sommers’s editorial call for a “What Didn’t Work for Me” (“On Conversations”).

While “What Works for Me” could be reductively considered as mere “teaching tips,” I would suggest that the genre is doing something quite different, not only offering practical lessons and exercises readily adaptable to the classroom, but also evidencing, hinting at, and alluding to pedagogies in development, in flux, and in moments of struggle. “What Works for Me” relies upon moments of failure as the genesis for the activity now articulated in the pieces. Elder, Lucas, Wallace, and all the other “What Works for Me” authors present teachers working through pedagogical issues, though that work is not always explicitly on the page.

The “Works” of a “What Works for Me”

What is on the page, however, is a methodical, academically conventional approach to writing about teaching. Reviewing the past ten years of “What Works for Me” makes apparent that the vast majority of these pieces adhere to a boilerplate
A number of years ago, Roberta Kjesrud, director of the writing center where I then worked, recommended to me that I ask writers to draw their essays. Her rationale is that drawing encourages a writer to approach a text differently—visually rather than textually—and hence it often will break a writer's block. She is right. I have since employed drawing as an aid to invention and revision many times in my classroom, though now I also use it for close reading a text.

On the day when our class will discuss a dense reading, I select a particularly puzzling passage that I see as pivotal to understanding the text as a whole—an excerpt that is fraught with contradictions, unsettles reader assumptions, defies summarization, or employs esoteric and abstract terms. Ideally I find a passage that exhibits all of these challenges. Arriving at class with a tall stack of paper and four boxes of sixty-four-count crayons, I point students to the excerpt I have chosen for the day's discussion. After reading it twice aloud, I distribute the art supplies and ask students to draw the passage. Once the initial moans that “I can only draw stick figures” have subsided, the class puts crayon to construction paper, coloring and chuckling, doodling and discussing, illustrating and (unbeknownst to them) interpreting the text.

Following ten minutes of coloring, we reconvene for a discussion. Students' drawings generally overlap, with many including similar images in their visual representation of the passage; there is, however, tension between the drawings. A student may glom onto a word or a phrase from the text, making it the focal point of an illustration, while other students ignore these same words, discarding them altogether from their representations of the passage. For instance, when I recently assigned “The Banking Concept of Education,” students easily unpacked Paulo Freire's banking and problem-posing metaphors. They were not as confident, however, in discussing his argument late in the chapter concerning oppression in light of permanence and change. When I asked students to draw select paragraphs that use these terms, many colored a classroom, but surprisingly images of a space ship, pocket change, leaves, horses and dogs and cats, the ascent of man, a truck laying cement, and even apple pie emerged, all of which, when explained, were supported by the text. Fruitful discussion stems from these drawings diverging greatly from the common sketches of the class, and students too shy to voice an against-the-grain reading can rely on their drawing to trace their unique interpretation of the passage for their peers (during the Freire discussion, every student in the class spoke). Thus, it is in the similarities and differences between the students' drawings that the value in this exercise lies; the similarities offer entry into the text, the differences into its nuances.
Working from the belief that drawing a passage is essentially an act of interpretation, this exercise requires that students discern key moments within a text, returning repeatedly to the text as they translate words into images and piece together a reading. And although we may never draw any final conclusions concerning difficult texts, going back to the drawing board does initiate the work of interpretation, for as French painter Henri Matisse reminds us, “Drawing is putting a line around an idea.”

“What Works for Me” pieces, by and large, make the generic moves of a typical full-length journal article, albeit in a truncated form; “Back to the Drawing Board” and its 549 words are no exception. As noted earlier, “What Works for Me” pieces tend to open with a statement of a problem and a solution, moves usually made within the opening sentences or paragraph of the piece. But just as there is no monolithic journal article form, there is no standard “What Works for Me” form, and each writer frames the problem and solution slightly differently. “Back to the Drawing Board,” for instance, sets up the problem implicitly with the statement “now I also use it for close reading a text,” suggesting that close reading is a struggle in my classroom and that this activity—the product of working through that struggle—is a possible solution.

The foundation of a problem and solution laid, some “What Works for Me” pieces position themselves among other scholarship, texts, or influences, a literature review of sorts. (The placement of this move situating the author among other writers and works varies between opening, medial, and closing paragraphs.) In its opening sentence, “Back to the Drawing Board” mentions Roberta Kjesurd as an impetus for the exercise it proposes, using her work as a writing center director as a springboard for this “What Works for Me.” In slight contrast to referencing a colleague as a means to situate a “What Works for Me,” 20 of the 56 “What Works for Me” authors published in the past ten years name authors or other pieces of literature, poetry, New York Times or National Public Radio articles, TV shows, or other texts; in further contrast, 7 others provide full citations for academic scholarship. Along the lines of including the words of others, 8 of the 56 either paraphrase or quote student work.

“What Works for Me” pieces then move into an explication of the lesson, explaining the exercise in greater detail over the course of (generally) one to three paragraphs. The earlier paragraphs in this sequence are akin to a methodology explication, and the latter to a results section; “Back to the Drawing Board” uses its second paragraph as its methodology, the third as results. The closing paragraph of “What Works for Me” pieces mirrors the conclusions section of a journal article, recapitulating the activity’s main benefits. “What Works for Me” pieces often close with a sentence—sometimes student feedback (Rutter), a play on words (Perrin), or even a quotation (as in “Back to the Drawing Board”)—reiterating why this lesson “works.” Rarely, a “What Works for Me” will end with a look toward other applications of the lesson; in a postscript, Elder’s “Motives” suggests that his “What Works for Me” assignment prompt could be useful in hiring new faculty (79). Seen this way, “What Works for Me” pieces are compressed journal articles: the open-
ing sentences gesture toward a problem (paragraph one of “Back to the Drawing Board”); the statement of solution is brief, mirroring the hypothesis of a full-length article (paragraph one’s final sentence); the explanation of the activity functions as methodology (paragraph two) and results (paragraph three) sections; and the closing sentences (or paragraph, in the case of “Back to the Drawing Board”) offer a recapitulation of the main issues addressed in the piece, with the occasional look toward future applications of this research agenda—a full-length research-genre article weighing in at a trim 200–750 words.

The “for Me” of a “What Works for Me”

The form of “What Works for Me” makes certain affordances to both readers and writers of the pieces. Its adaptation of the research article form, enables writers to represent, in an easily recognizable genre with which academic readers are familiar, the working through of a problem. The lessons proposed are easily appropriated and repeatable (due mainly to a clear explication of method), and the results discussion informs readers what to expect upon implementation. As an added bonus, following the generic conventions of academic discourse bestows upon “What Works for Me” writers a scholarly ethos. Yet, this form is also inhibiting; adherence to it risks further reifying the introduction-method-results-discussion model as the gold standard for academic writing. The form pushes toward a research-driven mindset privileging certain methodologies at the exclusion of others, and it precludes other ways of writing the classroom.

Recognizing the rhetorical benefits and drawbacks of academic forms, “What Works for Me” as a genre stands at a critical juncture. On the one hand, the pieces are relics of composition’s past as a praxis-oriented, service course. On the other hand, and rebelling against that formation of the discipline, “What Works for Me” contributions have adopted the research-genre form dominating academic discourse. These pieces are not mere “teaching tips” simply saying, “Do this. It works.” Rather, they are making an effort to situate themselves as doing valuable, academic, scholastic work while still offering practical suggestions for the classroom. “What Works for Me” is thus a hybrid discourse, one that calls upon the field’s historic roots by enacting “teaching tips” while simultaneously appropriating the research form expected by composition today.

This tension is evident in how “What Works for Me” situates the figure of the teacher, who is both the center of attention and relegated to the sidelines of the classroom by way of the rhetorical and discursive moves made within a “What Works for Me” piece. The titular “for Me” foregrounds the teacher; these are exercises that worked for a particular teacher, a teacher highlighted in the title. At the same time, though, the presentation of a “What Works for Me” backgrounds the teacher. Readers are given little information about the writers of these pieces, save for a name and an institutional affiliation. The easy, conventional means of constructing an academic ethos—a lengthy works cited accompanied by an author biography.
detailing courses taught, service positions held, and other works published—are noticeably absent in “What Works for Me.” Juxtaposed against this lessening of the presence of the author is the method these writers enact, an academic discourse that situates the teacher as the primary agent in the creation and execution of lesson plans; the teacher, by way of method, moves back to center stage. Yet, despite the teacher being the primary actor in many “What Works for Me” contributions, these pieces largely promote student-centered pedagogies, with a drive toward engagement, participation, and agency on the part of students; the teacher moves, again, back to the periphery of the classroom.

In the traditional academic journal article, the teacher is situated as a fount of knowledge, which is an ethos against which TETYC writers—most recently McKinney and Johnsen et al.—have spoken out. Perhaps the greatest risk of using the research genre to represent the classroom is how it positions the teacher in relation to students, and here is an area where “What Works for Me” shows its potential to reshape how composition writes the classroom. “What Works for Me” pieces are wrestling with the formation of the teacher by way of their positioning of that teacher, and in doing so these pieces are subtly pushing against the trappings of traditional academic discourse. For instance, that so few of them—roughly 40 percent—either name other authors and works or cite academic scholarship could be read as a push against scholarship as the sole source of knowledge; rather, “What Works for Me” pieces tend to ground expertise in experience. Or consider their length, perhaps a tacit statement that intellectual work can be done in few words.

As I noted earlier, TETYC is the only major journal in the field publishing these types of praxis-driven pieces, and TETYC seems aware of the unique work being done in “What Works for Me.” In his editorials, for instance, Sommers frequently plays with “What Works for Me,” titling his 39.2 editorial “What Might Work for Me.” In 35.2 Sommers lauds TETYC and its writers for “push[ing] the envelope of the academic journal genre” (125) in an editorial titled, rather significantly, “What Works for Me.” “What Works for Me” pieces themselves are pushing that envelope by paradoxically returning to, and reinventing, a genre from composition’s past.

As such, I see “What Works for Me” as having great potential to change the way writing instructors author our classroom experiences. Because these pieces are at the fringe of our field’s mainstream (i.e., published) discussions of teaching, they offer a space to speak differently about our classrooms, a place to challenge the dominant position of the research genre within academic discourse. To illustrate, let me offer a revision of “Back to the Drawing Board.” Acknowledging “What Works for Me” pieces to be “true accounts’ so carefully crafted” (Sommers, “Based” 245), here I turn toward narrative in attempting to relay what worked in my classroom. Granted, other scholarship—such as the aforementioned Comp Tales—is already utilizing the resources of narrative. But in contrast to those representations of the classroom, with this revision I have tried to retain the praxis orientation of “What Works for Me” (the series’ distinctive mark), ensure the narrative is not “unreflexively used” (Salvatori 297), and explore means other than the research genre to do such work:
“I want to try something different today,” said the teacher, twisting his wedding ring around his finger. “Take these crayons and this paper, and I’d like you to draw the second paragraph on page 412 of your textbook.”

John scoffed. “Draw it? What do you mean?”

“Let’s read it aloud as a class, and then I’m going to give you ten minutes or so to draw the passage.”

“But I can only draw stick figures,” Emily protested.

The teacher read the passage aloud twice, and students tentatively began drawing. A few days earlier, they had discussed this same passage, and while the class understood the first half, the second half became much more abstract, and discussion was notably strained. Now polishing his glasses as he walked around the room, the teacher—his 6’8” frame looming over his students—took note of what they drew: a space ship, pocket change, leaves, horses and cats and dogs, the ascent of man, a truck laying cement, and even apple pie.

Most of the students were still drawing when he reconvened the class.

“Katy, I see you drew an apple pie. Could you explain for us how you got that out of Freire’s essay? And while you’re at it, could you perhaps speculate on how Becca got a spaceship out of the same passage?”

This account is a leaner 220 words in comparison to the 549 of the first draft. My main guiding principle in this revision comes from Stephen King, who, in his memoir On Writing, tells aspiring writers that “one of the cardinal rules of good fiction is never tell us a thing if you can show us” (180). In that vein (which runs counter to much of academic writing, I would argue) I attempt here to narrate my account of drawing in the classroom without all the signposts of academic writing, eschewing the thesis statement and closing recapitulation of the lesson’s benefits in favor of just showing readers the classroom. Reluctantly, though, I cut the mention of this exercise’s genesis in the work of my colleague Roberta Kjesrud; whereas that rhetorical positioning of myself worked in the original, it sounded canned in the revision. And along those lines, the quotation from Matisse was axed too; it did not fit within this narrative structure. However, I was still able to sprinkle in, here and there, the instructions for how to do the activity.

The piece still revolves around a problem-solution narrative; however, at first I wanted to avoid that framing for fear of writing myself as what Coles calls the “hero-narrator” (272). I decided that the problem-solution framework, though, is perhaps unavoidable and not necessarily problematic. After all, if there were no problem, there would be no exigency for the story. But I have tried to lessen the tidiness of the solution in a few ways: (1) by not stating as clearly as I did in the first version that this lesson “works” and why it works, (2) by how I present myself: a nervous teacher (as evident by the fidgeting with his wedding ring and polishing of his glasses) coming back to a text a second time after a dismal first attempt, (3) by having the students voice objections—objections that were quickly glossed over in the earlier version of this piece and that are not resolved in the revision, and (4) by including the seemingly irrelevant detail that I am a “looming” 6’8” in an effort to introduce a bit of physical tension; sometimes in the classroom I
am uncomfortable in my height—are my students too? And does that affect what happens in the classroom?

Other revisions: While the earlier version of this “What Works for Me” goes into detail concerning the conversations prompted by this exercise, here I have just posed the initial question starting the conversation, hoping that readers can see the benefit of this exercise without me explicitly saying what it is. I have also tried to highlight potential issues instructors may encounter using this lesson: the teacher is uneasy and tentative about this activity, some students are resistant, and that opening question is a pretty hard one. I am pleased that this revision has the students speaking, though I am not pleased with their characterization as somewhat obstinate. Perhaps I should have included a few of the more enthusiastic students’ perspectives on the activity, but I did not for fear (again) of appearing as a “hero-narrator.”

This revision raises questions: What significance does the shift from first- to third-person have in the telling of this narrative? When the teacher is the writer of this story, the decision to remove that narrating voice is hardly inconsequential. Along these lines, what significance does the grammatical positioning of the story’s characters have? In the original, students are primarily positioned as the direct objects of sentences, save for the third paragraph where they move to the subject position. In contrast, the revision rarely places students as a direct object, and in both pieces the teacher is never the direct object. The positioning of students and teacher as subjects and objects of sentences speaks to larger questions concerning authority in the classroom—questions not easily answered—and clearly there is room for further revision with these issues in mind.

**Why “What Works for Me” Matters for Us**

With this revision and reflection upon it, I am not writing just for the 56 authors who have contributed “What Works for Me” pieces in the past ten years, nor just for those considering drafting a “What Works for Me” of their own. Rather, I claim that how we write the classroom is of great importance for composition as a field, teachers, and students. Regarding our field’s disciplinary identity, I see (at least) three issues. First, the ways we depict our classroom experiences matter because they reflect upon us as scholars; our words fashion the ethos we assume in the academic community. As composition continues to mature, we must ask ourselves if the methods we employ in writing about our teaching are the most effective of the available means to do the work we want to do. And in answering that question, our discourses will likely shift. For example, “What Works for Me,” as described by TETYC itself, has changed considerably: under editor Nell Ann Pickett, the pieces were “50- to 100-word descriptions of teaching tips;” editor Mark Reynolds revised them to be “50–200 word descriptions of teaching tips or classroom activities.” Editor Howard Tinberg kept Reynolds’s length boundaries but cut “teaching tips” from the journal’s characterization of the series—“brief descriptions of successful classroom activities; 50–200 words”—and Sommers retained Tinberg’s description yet lengthened “What Works for Me” to 200–750 words. These subtle changes
significantly modify the rhetorical demands of the genre as it moves away from the explicit “teaching tips” designation once included in its description while simultaneously growing in length; curious, though, that the “What Works for Me” authors of the past ten years, by and large, still hold tight to a single generic form. Might our adherence to and proclivity for the research genre be limiting the bounds of our scholarship, and might other rhetorics afford us more options in representing our teaching? What other ways of representing our work in the classroom could be more effective in furthering the larger goals of composition? Addressing these questions will likely entail a discussion of what the aims of writing instruction are, an important discussion prompted by “What Works for Me.”

A second issue for composition to consider: another point of entry into the project of reframing our field’s discussions of teaching is to consider the questions framing our portrayals of the classroom. Though not grammatically formed as a question per se, “What Works for Me,” as a title, does function as a prompt generating a very particular type of discourse: “What” asks for a lesson, “Works” a method, and “for Me” a conclusion of its merits from the view of the author. The title itself produces the introduction–method–results–discussion research-genre form so many of the pieces utilize. I am not suggesting that TETYC rename its pet genre, but the “What Works for Me” series title does serve as an example of a question fostering a discourse directly related to its formative question. In addition, then, to considering what other discourses can offer in representing our work in the classroom, we should also consider what other questions we can ask of the classroom, questions that might generate discourses other than the research article. For instance, in answering Sommers’s call for a “What Didn’t Work for Me” (“On Conversations”), Wallace’s “Seeing Red” dramatically eschews the standard form of the genre in favor of a seven-sentence narrative that spends the first five telling of an activity’s genesis and the final two of its implementation. The small addition of “Didn’t” to the “What Works for Me” prompt opens up new rhetorical options for Wallace’s pedagogical inquiry; as such, if we were to ask other questions of our teaching—as Sommers and Wallace are—what other discourses might we produce?

A third issue arising for the field concerns what value we ascribe to discourses that fall outside the standard genres typically used to discuss teaching. For instance, would TETYC accept the “Back to the Drawing Board” revision, and if the journal did, could readers make sense of it? The only clues as to the revision’s rhetorical purpose and place within the journal would be that it sits beneath the “What Works for Me” banner, and readers may have to stretch to discern the piece’s aims. If the “Back to the Drawing Board” revision were to appear in TETYC, it would likely need rhetorical framing akin to the one-sentence descriptors headlining feature articles and “Instructional Notes” but currently absent from “What Works for Me.” A piece that stands outside the territory of academic writing ultimately begs questions of value and legibility: Should it be published, and if so, with how much additional assistance offered to readers? How should readers read it? And of what worth is writing that does not fall in step with the pieces published alongside it?
For teachers, “What Works for Me” pieces pose the question of authority in the classroom, a tacit theme running throughout this article. Paradoxically, “What Works for Me” pieces are firmly grounded in a teacher-centered discourse, as evident by the titular “for Me,” while simultaneously promoting a student-centered classroom. Coles’s “hero-narrator” (272) specter lurks in these discourses, and while that ethos is under fire in much pedagogical scholarship, these pieces can speak to the benefit of narratives that give the teacher a firm place to stand. The “What Works for Me” genre asks teacherly readers to consider the manifestations of authority in their own teaching, discerning how to balance the yearning for a student-centered classroom with the very real, and perhaps unavoidable, presence of teacher-centered authority.

For students, then, “What Works for Me” matters greatly. This genre evidences our discipline’s wrestling with academic discourse, demonstrates the discursive products of certain questions, and touches on the power dynamics of a classroom; therefore the activities they produce become parts of pedagogies that shape the broad strokes of a teacher’s work in the classroom and within the field. The conversations prompted by these pieces embody larger tensions within composition that trickle into the seemingly innocuous first-day prompt or citation exercise offered in a “What Works for Me.” As “What Works for Me” illustrates, all lessons are grounded in rhetorics much larger than the bounds of the classroom, and because this discursive weight shapes our pedagogies, how we write the classroom has a direct impact on the students therein. “What Works for Me,” with its adherence to and ambivalence toward academic discourse, prompts writing instructors to reconsider how we write the classroom, which, consequently, informs not only our approach to the craft of teaching (thereby affecting students) but also our relationship to the academy (thereby affecting the field). Significantly, these pieces—relics of composition’s history that evidence a push toward a new disciplinary identity—ask questions concerning the relationship between a discipline and academic discourse, the same questions students in first-year writing courses ask as they attempt to ferret out where they fit within academe. In exploring the genres, discourses, and rhetorics we use to write the classroom, hopefully we may discover—and invent, if need be—productive ways to articulate what works for me, and for that matter, for us.

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Notes

1. Of the 56 authors writing “What Works for Me” in issues 30.1 through 39.4, Dana Elder is by far the most prolific, with six to his name. A handful of other writers (Bobkoff; Borrowman; Dirk; Moe; and Morris) have published two. The 56 authors represent 54 different institutions, both two- and four-year schools, ranging from community colleges to small liberal arts colleges to state universities to land grant and Research 1 universities. (And for those keeping track at home, 25 of the 66 “What Works for Me” published in the past ten years appeared in September issues, 20 in December issues, 12 in March issues, and 9 in May issues of TETYC.)

Also of note concerning authorship: from issue 36.4—Sommers’s introduction of the “New Voice” designation recognizing a writer’s first appearance in TETYC—to issue 39.4 (the end point of this study), 19 out of the 27 “What Works for Me” pieces published are by New Voices.

2. For first-day activities, see Edward A. Dougherty; Jan Geyer; Dorothy Minor; Kevin Morris (“First Days”); Susan M. Plachta; and John Yohe. For reading comprehension, see Jane Arnold; Donna Bontatibus; Richard Diguette; Randy Laist; Peter Wayne Moe (“Back”); Gerald Lee Ratliffe; H. Elizabeth Smith; and Kathy Walsh-Piper. For working with sources, see Suanna H. Davis; Jeffrey Klausman; Kevin Morris (“BSCs”); and Alfred G. Mueller II. For grammar, editing, and syntax, see Michael Bobkoff (“Apostrophobia”); Kate Bradley; Brian P. Hall; Chris Kreiser; Rita Pourteau; Marsha A. Rutter; and Kathleen Anne Weinberg.

Another significant topical trend: given that there is much technological innovation occurring within the pedagogies of TETYC writers and readers, it is surprising that technology in the classroom is given relatively light attention in “What Works for Me.” (Though I do note that TETYC frequently will publish a technology-themed issue; see 37.3 and 30.2, and, outside the range of this study, 27.4 and 23.3, for example). A small handful in the past ten years—Laurie Lyken’s webinars, Karen Petit’s hyperlinks, Jeanne Marie Rose’s anchored audio—are asking students to consume new technologies. However, with the notable exceptions of Carrie DuPre (whose students speak their papers into voicemail) and Mark Harris (whose students compose on a wiki), very few “What Works for Me” authors in the scope of this study ask students to use technology to produce discourse.

A further research agenda might investigate the topics addressed in “What Works for Me.” It would be compelling to examine how, for instance, multimodal pedagogies appearing in “What Works for Me” (such as Kia Jane Richmond’s use of music and television or Rob Wallace’s use of paintings) coincide with composition’s burgeoning interest in multimodal teaching.

3. I use “Back to the Drawing Board” for three reasons: (1) while my own writing surely could never represent the entire genre, it does evidence many of the larger trends I see in “What Works for Me,” (2) using “Back to the Drawing Board” allows me to address a central text rather than brush lightly over 66 of
them, and (3) making my own writing a scapegoat lets me speak without stepping on the toes of teachers and writers much more experienced than I.


5. The 20 authors who mention other works and/or writers are Jane Arnold; Michael Bobkoff (“What”); Donna Bontatibus; Kate Bradley; Suanna H. Davis; Richard Diguette; Dana Elder (“Worth”); Samm Erickson; James Andrew Freeman; Christopher F. Johnston; Jeffrey Klausman; Jim LaBate; Randy Laist; Peter Wayne Moe (“Back”); Kevin Morris (“BSCs”); Alfred G. Mueller II; Gerald Lee Ratliffe; H. Elizabeth Smith; Maria Shine Stewart; and Pamela Tambornino. The seven authors who cite academic work are Eric Bateman; Bob Blaisdell; Dana Elder (“Plus-Plus”); Mark Harris; Tom Peele; Karen Petit; and John Yohe.

By “student work,” I am not including student feedback or remarks made on course evaluations (such as appears in Jeanne Marie Rose’s or Pamela Tambornino’s pieces) but instead work produced by students in a course. Kerry Dirk (“Mind”), Dana Elder (“Worth”), Peter Wayne Moe (“Back”), and Kathleen Anne Weinberg each paraphrase student work. Edward A. Dougherty, Chris Kreiser, Rita Pourteau, and Kathy Walsh-Piper quote it directly. Walsh-Piper’s use of student work stands out, as she is the only “What Works for Me” writer in the past ten years to include both first and last name of the students quoted.

6. Some writers, however, find ways to include subtle biographical information nonetheless. For instance, James Freeman opens his piece with “For twenty-plus years, I have quested” (79), and Dana Elder makes an identical rhetorical move to open “Motives”: “For many years I’ve sought” (79). Both adverbial clauses give a glimpse into these seasoned educators’ years in the classroom, thereby establishing an ethos not offered by name and institutional affiliation alone.

7. Two additional ideas from Stephen King that might reshape our academic writing are his notions that “the job of fiction is to find the truth inside the story’s web of lies” (159) and that the job of the writer is “to express the truth of how people act and talk through the medium of a made-up story” (186). Space here does not permit a full discussion of the merits of fiction for scholarship, but King’s comments provide much fodder for academic writers looking for means other than the research article to write truth.

8. Though outside the ten-year span of this project from issues 30.1 to 39.4, I want to note two shifts, one in the series TETYC publishes and the other in how they are presented. Hardly trite, these changes evidence the larger discursive trends addressed in this project, shifts that reflect a reflexive questioning of how we write the classroom and what means are the most effective to do so.

First, in his editorial “From the New Editor,” Mark Reynolds credits editor Nell Ann Pickett with giving TETYC “What Works for Me,” “Instructional Notes,” and the now absent “What Concerns Me.” “What Concerns Me” was, under Pickett’s editorship, a “50–150-word wish, comment, or problem.” Reynolds revised the description to a “50–200 word comment on a professional problem
of concern.” Some notable names published in “What Concerns Me,” including Edward P. J. Corbett with his four-sentence “Over-emphasis on Research and Publication.” TETYC often published “What Works for Me” and “What Concerns Me” in tandem, a handful of the latter following a handful of the former. Tammy St. Louis-Rines’s “A for Effort?” in issue 26.1 marks the last “What Concerns Me.” When Howard Tinberg instituted the “Information for Authors” page prefacing each edition of TETYC with issue 29.1, the short descriptor for “What Concerns Me” was not included, perhaps signaling the demise of the genre within the pages of TETYC. Furthering the work of this article, additional research might consider the lost genres and series of academic writing—such as “What Concerns Me” and the CCC’s aforementioned “Staffroom Interchange”—and put their inception and terminus in relation to larger trends within the field.

Second, under Pickett and Reynolds, “What Works for Me” is presented as a single column while feature articles are in dual columns; Tinberg swapped the two, putting feature articles in a single column and “What Works for Me” in dual columns. There is great rhetorical significance in the decision to present work in a single- versus a dual-column format, but visual rhetorics are beyond the scope of this project.

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