



# With regret: The genre of teachers' public resignation letters



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## ABSTRACT

In recent years, in blogs and online news sites, a novel genre has emerged. Understanding this genre—the public teacher resignation letter—is the primary investigation explored here. Through examination of 22 viral public resignation letters, and utilizing Genre Theory and moves analysis, research questions included: (1) What are the common features of this genre, as demonstrated in the teacher-writers' moves and submoves? (2) When describing the state of education today, what particular sub-moves do teacher-writers utilize, and to what ends? Findings indicate remarkable similarity between the moves teacher-writers make in their letters, including, for example, building expertise and ethos, explaining the state of education today, and identifying abandonment. Authors also made use of sub-moves like metaphors, emotional appeals, and language of defiance and resistance. Our analysis reveals (1) how the teachers are writing and what work their letters do, (2) what they're writing about and what this reveals about current neoliberal policies, and (3) where we see implications of their writing for various audiences.

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*"Never before had I felt so powerless and controlled."* (Schwartz, 2014)

*"I am no longer willing to operate under the old rules while the weight of our educational bureaucracy crushes our country."* (Edgerton, 2012)

## 1. Introduction

Ellie Rubenstein's (2013) voice breaks—but just barely—as she speaks into the camera, a sheer white curtain blowing behind her, filling the scene with a bright light that belies the sadness and gravity of what she is about to say. She is reading her resignation letter, tendered after over fifteen years of teaching. Rubenstein's video, posted on YouTube at the same time as it was delivered in hard copy to administrators, is titled "In Pursuit of Happiness." For Rubenstein, happiness means finding a way to contribute to education outside of the traditional classroom, a space that has come to her to feel stifling and controlling, where "everything [she] loved about teaching is extinct."

Rubenstein is not alone in these feelings or in her distribution of her resignation letter in this way. Many such letters appear between May and June, as one school year comes to a close and teachers begin making employment decisions about the following

one. Others appear in the middle of a year, in November or March, notoriously known to teachers as the most difficult months. Amidst an abundance of scholarly literature and popular media about the teacher shortage and why teachers leave, a unique and novel genre has emerged, one which acts as a testament to the current state of public education and makes use of teachers' identities as writers. Understanding this genre—the public teacher resignation letter—is the primary investigation explored here.

Within the past five years in the United States, many teachers have taken to posting their resignation letters online, primarily through blogs or as op-eds on local or national news websites. Consequently, these letters become widely disseminated and reveal a contemporary shift in public discourse where conversations become more visible, spreadable, and searchable (Boyd, 2014). These letters come from beginning and veteran teachers, urban and suburban teachers, and teachers in all regions of the country. As a whole, these letters provide vital insights into what makes teachers leave and the choices they make when announcing their decision in a public forum. Such letters also demonstrate the "writerly" aspect of teachers' identities, and, as Whitney, Zuidema, and Fredricksen (2014) state, we also "see writing as integral to teaching practice and professional development, as a way for teachers to claim authority in decisions about education, and as a means to include their voices in debates that affect their work" (p. 181).

To better understand the emerging genre of teachers' public resignation letters, one must first understand a related body of literature on teacher attrition. Research has continuously shown that many teachers in the U.S., especially those working in high-

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needs areas, leave within five years of hire (Ingersoll, 2003). This challenge of retention is of greater concern than the challenge of recruitment, as enough teachers are being prepared, but they are not staying in the profession, costing schools and districts upwards of \$2.2 billion each year (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2014; Ingersoll & May, 2011). Teachers' reasons for leaving have little to do with the reasons most frequently touted by education reformers, such as pay or student behavior. Rather, teachers most often report that working conditions contribute most to their turnover, including lack of resources, curricular autonomy, respect for their time, respect for the profession, administrative support, and time free from bureaucratic paperwork (Byrd-Blake et al., 2010; National Center for Education Statistics, 2014; National Education Association, 2003; Santoro, 2011). At the same time, as they face more responsibility for raising test scores and "saving" schools from failure, teachers are forced to use scripted curriculum and/or strict guidelines and benchmarks (Kumashiro, 2009). These recent policy moves may be at odds with teachers' personal and professional commitments, and as a result, may push teachers out of the classroom at equally high or higher rates than in years past. Though this study takes place in a U.S. context, the phenomenon of teacher attrition due to oppressive policies and practices is not confined to this country. Indeed, research continues to demonstrate the global advance of neoliberal ideology across the world (i.e. Hill & Kumar, 2009).

While other research that has explored these same resignation letters focused on the reasons they leave and what has happened to the authors since the time of writing, this study takes a different approach, focusing on the rhetorical moves emerging in this new genre. Because we view these letters as teachers' social action in the world through writing, we draw on genre theory to better understand how these teachers use writing to try to make a difference in education for teachers and students. Miller (1984), in her article in which she defined genre as collective "social action," argued that studying the genres that groups of writers use can "tell us something theoretically important about discourse" (pg. 155). By examining these letters via genre theory and an analysis of the particular moves and sub-moves the authors made, we hope to better understand the work these writers were hoping to accomplish through writing, and in so doing, we might learn more about the work there is to do to participate in this social action. Specifically, the research questions for this study included:

- (1) What are the common features of this genre, as demonstrated in the teacher-writers moves and sub-moves?
- (2) When describing the state of education today, what particular sub-moves do teacher-writers utilize, and to what ends?

We argue that the genre can be characterized by five common features, found in each of the analyzed texts: introducing resignation as a purpose of the letter, building expertise and ethos, explaining the state of education today, identifying abandonment, and closing the letter. We also found that, when discussing the contemporary educational climate in the longest portion of each letter, teacher-writers employed specific linguistic sub-moves such as metaphors, dichotomies, portraits, expressive language, emotional appeals, and questions as defiance and resistance. Interestingly, though the authors did not speak to each other before writing or use each other's letters as models, and though they varied in length, audience, and form, all of the letters employed the same moves, suggesting that the genre and its features emerged naturally.

In the sections that follow, we frame our research through Genre Theory, paying particular attention to how authors incorporate specific features and moves to achieve specific aims. Then we describe our methodology and findings organized by research question.

Finally, we offer new ways of understanding this genre and the teacher-writers' aims as part of our discussion and conclusion.

## 2. Genre as typified social action

We frame these resignation letters as sites of action (Bawarshi, 2003) of the genre of teacher resignation letters. For several decades, genre theorists have argued that genre is not a template of common features of a particular type of writing but rather is "the action it is used to accomplish" (Miller, 1984). Writing, then, is action to do work in the world, and genres are typified versions of that action. As education and literacy researchers, this idea resonates with our beliefs that discourse is social action (Fairclough, 1992) and writing is a situated literacy practice, embedded in social, cultural, and historical contexts (Brandt, 2001; Street, 1984). From this perspective, we acknowledge that our understanding and use of genre theory here collapses the various strands of influence with which genre scholars align themselves (see Bawarshi & Reiff, 2010), noting that Swales has argued that the various strands of genre theory have somewhat "coalesced" (Swales, 2009, p. 4).

Genre scholars argued for a conceptualization of genre as typified social action to work against ongoing notions of genres as pre-existing containers of static forms of writing that writers mimic. Instead, genre theory recognizes the individuality and agency of writers who choose what rhetorical moves to make within a particular rhetorical context but do so in ways that are typical of other writers who are writing to accomplish similar work. As Devitt (2004) argued,

Discourse exists only when individuals act, and their actions will always be grounded in their uniqueness as well as their social experience... But for existing genres to exist at all, people must have perceived similarities among disparate situations (p. 21).

The occurrence of a genre signals that a recurring situation exists and that people are organizing the action that they are taking through writing. The teachers in this study taught in various social and geographic contexts but, through the writing of these resignation letters, make sense of similar experiences and work toward common social action.

Similar to the research of Schaefer, Downey, and Clandinin (2014), we see the letters as "stories to leave by" (p. 9). The teachers, then, are also storytellers, or writers. Though there exists a body of research about teachers-as-writers (such as Cremin & Baker, 2010; Dawson, 2011; Woodard, 2015), this research focuses mainly on English teachers. Yet our sample of teacher-writers includes educators of all grade levels and content areas, demonstrating the need for additional inquiry into the habits and practices of all types of teachers who use writing for a particular purpose, be it professional development (Fleischer, 2004) or social action (Author A, under review). In considering teacher-writers' positionality as de facto speakers for their profession, by virtue of many resignation letters going "viral," our views align with those of Whitney et al. (2014), who argue that:

Teachers' authority to speak and write publicly about educational matters is grounded in their knowledge, which in turn is inextricably bound to their practice. They are uniquely positioned: They are fully immersed in the classroom, and thus, their knowledge is locally situated and contextualized; yet, teachers can also act as observers who view the classroom from differing angles, making connections with others' understandings of teaching and learning in order both to draw from and contribute to the wider knowledge base (p. 61).

Overall, just as teachers assert their views in the written texts presented here, we, too, take a political stance by considering these

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