

When “Leaning In” Becomes “Falling on Your Face”

Vanessa Garcia
and Laura Skokan

Composing in a familiar genre becomes extremely complicated when switching into a leadership role. In this article, Vanessa Garcia and Laura Skokan team up to explore the challenges they faced in their new roles, while also addressing the genre of the *Grassroots Writing Research Journal* article itself and how genres require a step away from the familiar. This interview examines these shifts through cultural-historical activity theory (CHAT).

This article is conducted as an interview. As the interviewer, I will adopt the convention of putting my questions in italic and speaking from a neutral position as if I were a non-entity (if the reader would be so kind as to mentally cross out the above “I” and “my,” it would please the interviewer).

The two interviewees are Vanessa Garcia and Laura Skokan, each of whom recently worked to transfer knowledge as they changed positions within a literate activity system. Even though the compositions they created might be in the same genre as before, the tasks, concerns, and subgenres within that field are completely different. Vanessa went from composing a sketch show as an actor to being the director of one, and Laura composed the classroom genre as a student only to become the teacher. While this switch is the main focus of the interview, it should be noted that Vanessa was a 2013–14 *Grassroots Undergraduate Writing Research Scholar*, a coveted yearly scholarship where the recipient works with the journal to create an article. As is the case with most articles (*Grassroots* and others alike), Vanessa wrote multiple drafts. The interview will address the earlier stages she went through to get it here. This is the culmination of her work.

New Writing Activities

1. *What sort of writing activities do you do now that you're the person in charge?*

VANESSA: The writing activities I did for my sketch comedy show varied from writing comedic sketches to texting my cast about rehearsals. Many of the writing activities I did to get the sketch show on its feet included: putting up flyers for auditions of the show, making audition sheets for the people auditioning, posting the cast list through emails and Facebook, setting up and posting a rehearsal schedule, writing sketches/scripts, texting the actors and others involved to remind them about rehearsals, setting up a Facebook group for the cast, and designing programs/flyers and other pieces of information for the show.

LAURA: Oof. So many more than I originally thought. I have to come up with homework (the assignment itself and the actual written-out description), the projects (including revisions based on the students' needs), comments on homework, prompts for in-class activities (even when they're not written out for the class, I need to write them for myself). The syllabus. And I gathered examples of the kinds of texts that I need to create, which isn't physically writing, but is an activity thereof. I also have to determine if what I think is really cool is actually relevant, and, more importantly, marginally cool to an undergrad. You know, paying attention to its *Reception*.

2. *How did you learn to do them? (What examples had you seen? What things did you have to modify in order to make your examples fit your needs?)*

VANESSA: I have directed a couple of shows before this one and have been a committee head for other clubs, so I have gained a lot of knowledge on how to reach my cast members, audience, and the show itself. With past shows I have done, texting seemed to be the medium that reached my actors the fastest, so I took this into account for my sketch show.

LAURA: Yeah, deciding on the right vehicle for *Distribution* is so important to your message getting out there. When I would send a mass email to the students through ReggieNet, a lot of them would say they didn't get it. Whether or not that was true, I realized I needed a different vehicle to make sure information got out to everyone. The only thing I knew they all got was the homework (because they all had to make submissions). So that's where I put important non-homework-related information. When we had the library day, question three in the assignment was, "Tell me where we're meeting next class." Everyone showed up. The homework was an effective tool to use.

VANESSA: *Distribution IS important!* One of the things I noticed was how the tools, or the *Production* techniques you use, really impact the final product. For my sketch show we had made this really awesome program (Figures 1 and 2), and worked really hard to make it, but we realized that in order to make enough copies for everyone and have it in color, it was just going to cost more than we had. We had to resort to putting the information into Word documents and printing three on each page (Figure 3). This wasn’t what we wanted at first and it impacted what originally we wanted to put out there, but I think the audience still responded well to the programs we gave them. It’s weird to think of money as a tool and how much our tools (or lack thereof) changed what we were able to put out into the world.

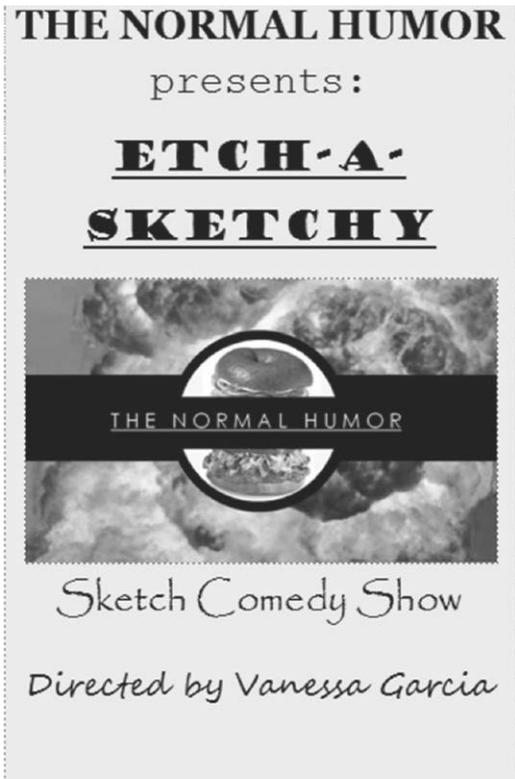


Figure 1: Front cover of original program, which was to be printed in full color.

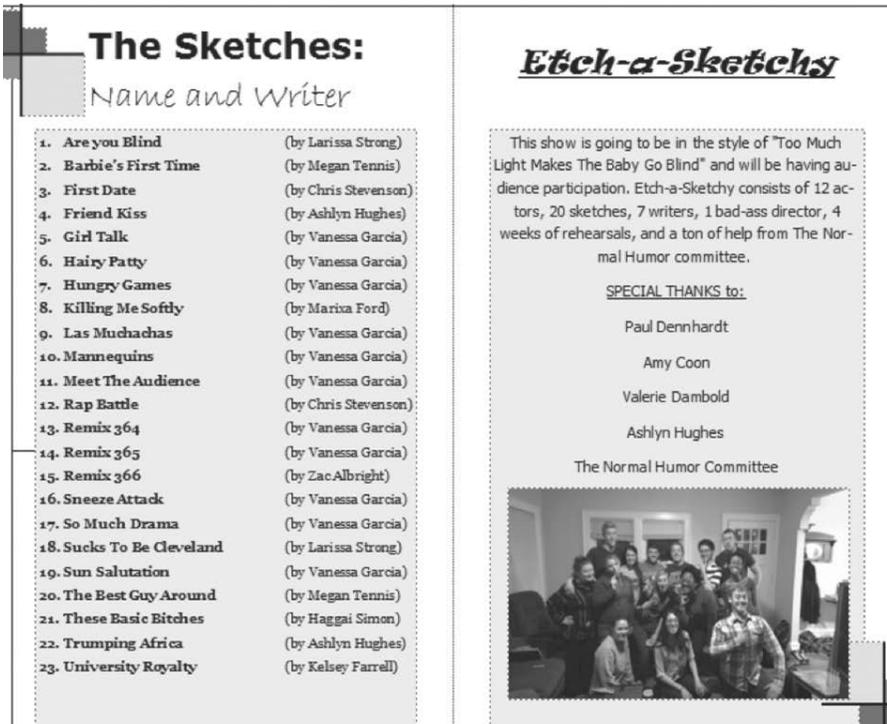


Figure 2: Inside of original program, which was to be printed in full color.

<p>ETCH-A-SKETCHY Directed by Vanessa Garcia</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Are you Blind (by Larissa Strong) 2. Barbie's First Time (by Megan Tennis) 3. First Date (by Chris Stevenson) 4. Friend Kias (by Abbigyn Hughes) 5. Hairy Patty (by Vanessa Garcia) 6. Hungry Games (by Vanessa Garcia) 7. Killing Me Softly (by Marisa Ford) 8. Las Muchachas (by Vanessa Garcia) 9. Rap Battle (by Chris Stevenson) 10. Remix 364 (by Vanessa Garcia) 11. Remix 365 (by Vanessa Garcia) 12. Remix 366 (by Zac Albright) 13. Sneeze Attack (by Vanessa Garcia) 14. So Much Drama (by Vanessa Garcia) 15. Sucks To Be Cleveland (by Larissa Strong) 16. Sun Salutation (by Vanessa Garcia) 17. The Best Guy Around (by Megan Tennis) 18. These Basic Bitches (by Haggai Simon) 19. Trumping Africa (by Abbigyn Hughes) 20. University Royalty (by Kelsey Farrell) <p>Cast Larissa Strong Marisa Ford Vicki Sanders Caitlin Graham Megan Tennis Aly Morton Luise Schneider Zac Albright Brandon Krantz Haggai Simon Ryan Englemann Roger Jestsch Chris Stevenson (AD) Anne Tobin (SM/understudy)</p>	<p>ETCH-A-SKETCHY Directed by Vanessa Garcia</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Are you Blind (by Larissa Strong) 2. Barbie's First Time (by Megan Tennis) 3. First Date (by Chris Stevenson) 4. Friend Kias (by Abbigyn Hughes) 5. Hairy Patty (by Vanessa Garcia) 6. Hungry Games (by Vanessa Garcia) 7. Killing Me Softly (by Marisa Ford) 8. Las Muchachas (by Vanessa Garcia) 9. Rap Battle (by Chris Stevenson) 10. Remix 364 (by Vanessa Garcia) 11. Remix 365 (by Vanessa Garcia) 12. Remix 366 (by Zac Albright) 13. Sneeze Attack (by Vanessa Garcia) 14. So Much Drama (by Vanessa Garcia) 15. Sucks To Be Cleveland (by Larissa Strong) 16. Sun Salutation (by Vanessa Garcia) 17. The Best Guy Around (by Megan Tennis) 18. These Basic Bitches (by Haggai Simon) 19. Trumping Africa (by Abbigyn Hughes) 20. University Royalty (by Kelsey Farrell) <p>Cast Larissa Strong Marisa Ford Vicki Sanders Caitlin Graham Megan Tennis Aly Morton Luise Schneider Zac Albright Brandon Krantz Haggai Simon Ryan Englemann Roger Jestsch Chris Stevenson (AD) Anne Tobin (SM/understudy)</p>	<p>ETCH-A-SKETCHY Directed by Vanessa Garcia</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Are you Blind (by Larissa Strong) 2. Barbie's First Time (by Megan Tennis) 3. First Date (by Chris Stevenson) 4. Friend Kias (by Abbigyn Hughes) 5. Hairy Patty (by Vanessa Garcia) 6. Hungry Games (by Vanessa Garcia) 7. Killing Me Softly (by Marisa Ford) 8. Las Muchachas (by Vanessa Garcia) 9. Rap Battle (by Chris Stevenson) 10. Remix 364 (by Vanessa Garcia) 11. Remix 365 (by Vanessa Garcia) 12. Remix 366 (by Zac Albright) 13. Sneeze Attack (by Vanessa Garcia) 14. So Much Drama (by Vanessa Garcia) 15. Sucks To Be Cleveland (by Larissa Strong) 16. Sun Salutation (by Vanessa Garcia) 17. The Best Guy Around (by Megan Tennis) 18. These Basic Bitches (by Haggai Simon) 19. Trumping Africa (by Abbigyn Hughes) 20. University Royalty (by Kelsey Farrell) <p>Cast Larissa Strong Marisa Ford Vicki Sanders Caitlin Graham Megan Tennis Aly Morton Luise Schneider Zac Albright Brandon Krantz Haggai Simon Ryan Englemann Roger Jestsch Chris Stevenson (AD) Anne Tobin (SM/understudy)</p>
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Figure 3: Black and white program, printed three to a page to save costs.

3. *Were there any examples that were not successful at first? And what were the steps you took to get around that?*

LAURA: I fancy myself a decent writer, but writing as a teacher has a completely different set of genres and skills I'm still in the process of learning. There was a homework assignment last year that I'd written as a block of text, and it didn't get great response from the students. So this semester I really tried to concentrate on *Reception*—making it clearer for the student. I made the text into numbered questions that built off of each other (a tip I'd picked up from fellow grad student Michelle Wright). And it worked so well! They got this extremely complicated idea (that “good grammar” isn't a stable, universal fact, it's genre-dependent) and made insightful connections, without me having to “teach” it in class. Other students did the exact same readings the year before and I had asked similar questions, but it seemed like the way I presented them this time, the way they were ordered, was what really got through to them.

VANESSA: That's really awesome that trying to focus on *Reception* is what made your students understand the material more clearly. This reminds me of the time when a friend of mine wrote a sketch for the sketch show called “First Date.” After rehearsing it a couple of times, a cast member was telling

me that he didn’t quite understand the sketch and felt that it didn’t follow the 5-point structure (Figure 4) that I gave the cast on how to write a sketch. Then other cast members started tearing the sketch apart in front of the writer and everything got out of hand. There was a lot of negativity in the room so I knew I had to step up as the director. I can’t remember what I said, word for word, but I said something along the lines of “Alright guys. What needs to happen is: First, Chris is going to work on a second draft of the sketch following the five-point structure; second, as actors you do not tell other actors how to act and you do not tell other writers what to write. I am the director and I am the one who is in charge of directing you and the writers of this show. Please trust me and know that I am leading you into having a wonderful show and for this I need your positive energy and professional focus.” This “stern” talk really showed my cast who was in charge, and they soon apologized for being disrespectful toward the people who are writing/working hard for them to put up this show. Communication is what got them to focus, so this kind of matches up with your *Reception* change.

LAURA: You’re really clear with the function of each role. I find that to be so tricky to realize for yourself. When I’m creating assignments, I tend to over-write. As a student, if I’m handed a block paragraph, I’m less likely to read it. But as a teacher, if I want something to be nuanced, my default is to write long paragraphs. This is my *Antecedent Genre* spilling over. When I was a playwright, monologues were a genre-appropriate way to convey complex ideas. But now that is transferring over into assignments (a different genre/audience), and so it doesn’t work.

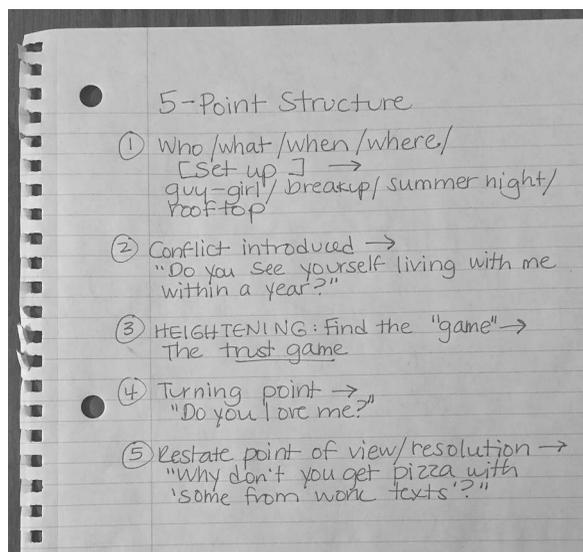


Figure 4. The five-point structure for sketches.

Genre Research of the Leadership Role

4. When you weren’t in charge (i.e., for Vanessa, an actor, and for Laura, a student), what things did you learn from studying the person who was (director or teacher)?

VANESSA: Over the summer I observed things about my director for the sketch show I did at Stage 773. He was very chill. He was okay with people

coming in late, and people not being memorized, though he encouraged us a lot to make sure we were memorized and on time, but also knew that it was up to us to make that happen. He definitely put the responsibility on us as actors to do our part of the work. I liked this about him, because it pushed me to work really hard on memorizing my lines and being there on time to rehearse in the space. He gave us breaks when needed and gave us great notes in between scenes. His notes were very specific and to the point and I really appreciated that about him. He gave us direction in one sentence, whereas for me it takes a while to say what I need to say and, therefore, I have a hard time explaining to people how I picture the scene(s) going. I am more of a visual learner, so I have to see it done, to then explain what it is I want. This is something I want to work on, but I know that with more experience as a director I will be able to establish my ideas easier and project them aloud to my actors in a simpler way.

LAURA: Aw. That's really nice. My brain automatically goes to the bad examples. Like if I got annoyed with a teacher, I would nitpick every assignment in order to prove how useless it was. I could only take these assignments in on a very limited scale. Cutting it down by asking, "How will this ever help me in my life?" Probably a self-fulfilling prophecy, I left those classes feeling like I didn't get anything out of them. What I focused on, instead, was a list of "nevers"—things I would never do if I was ever in charge. (*Side note: I may have done all of them.*) With teachers that I liked, I focused on the information they were saying and less on how they were saying it—*why* I was getting so much from them. It was seeing the trees and not the forest.

VANESSA: I totally get you. I am the same way with actors I watch. If I like their style of acting I am more likely to watch more of their movies and study their methods whereas with actors I don't particularly like I probably wouldn't watch their upcoming movies.

5. *Now that you're in charge, what things do you wish you had paid attention to?*

LAURA: Well, I wish I had at least considered that maybe there was a bigger purpose to the assignment than what I was immediately seeing. I probably would have gotten more out of them as a student, but it would have been so helpful to me now as a teacher. Same goes for paying attention to the teachers I liked. Moving class discussion along especially. If it's done well, it's nearly undetectable. As a student, I felt like it magically happened. As a teacher, I see that class discussion is a combination of the atmosphere the teacher created, the comments the teacher uses to encourage or shape the conversation, and only then is it the group of students themselves. I want to go back to study those subtle skills.

VANESSA: That’s kind of like my experience with the sketch show I did over the summer, but slightly different, because I was with people a couple of years older than me and all were professionally involved with comedy, whereas, with my show at ISU, I worked with students my age or younger. We are also peers and had some classes together, so getting them to respect me as their director was tough at times. At the first rehearsal, I had to put my serious face on and let them know that I am here to work and produce a great show by providing them with my skills and experiences. There were times when the focus and energy would be negative so I would have to sternly talk to them. I wish I could have established certain rules I wanted the actors to adhere to in the rehearsal process before we started to let them know that this was serious business for me and having them behave professionally was something I needed.

6. *What has been the most difficult thing about becoming a director/teacher (and actually executing the role of a director/teacher rather than just studying it)?*

VANESSA: The most difficult thing about becoming a director is gaining respect. Through watching directors I’ve had and working with professionals, I have learned that to be taken seriously, I need to have respect. In order to have respect, I must, in turn, give it to my actors. By treating my actors as professionals and giving them the same respect that I wanted, I was able to gain their attention and loyalty to not only myself, but to the show as well. They saw how much I loved this show and how much hard work I put into making it happen. I saw my actors reciprocated it by posting Facebook statuses, sharing pictures of the cast, and spreading the word to their friends and family about the show. Seeing them do all of these things really showed me how much they, too, loved this show and how they respected me enough to support me and trust me in this hilarious journey.

LAURA: Your observation that your persona affects the group—that’s *Representation!* And gaining respect is such an important part of being the person in charge, but, kind of like you’re saying, how you get it changes depending on the situation. My first semester of teaching, I didn’t want to be perceived as a pushover. I don’t think this is uncommon for new teachers, because you feel insecure so you compensate by acting tough. So when students wrote me to say they were sick, I made a conscious decision not to say, “Feel better!” Instead, I answered with a simple, “Thanks for letting me know.” I also didn’t use exclamation points when they did something awesome in their homework. These felt too much like the “friend” role and not what I imagined for “teacher.” This semester, I decided to be a human. The genre can handle both. I was a teacher and in charge both semesters.

VANESSA: The teacher/student or director/actor relationship is always hard when you want to show your authority and not be too much of a “friend,” as you said. I completely agree that doing both is a good solution to showing you’re in control, but that you can be approachable as well.

7. *What has been the most unexpected thing you’ve had to deal with?*

VANESSA: I was working with an actress who is my age and has had her fair share of experience in improvisation. This was the first show she had ever acted in that wasn’t improv, so working with her was a lot of fun, but very stressful at times. There would be rehearsals where she would stop to give other actors direction on how to act or do something (and as an actor you only want direction from the director, because it is looked down upon when actors try to direct other actors). There would be moments when I would be leading a focus exercise/warm-up game where she would stop it and say she wasn’t feeling it or that she didn’t understand it. Because she is used to working with her improv group and their style of warming up, she closes her eyes to other types of rehearsal processes. It was hard when she would stop a rehearsal, because I could tell that the other actors were annoyed by it and many of them came up to me and told me that her energy and attitude really brought them down. I had to stress to everyone (even though I was just directing it towards the one actress) that they needed to be open to working with me, to trust that I know what I am doing, and to be open to new ideas. Once I talked to the group as a whole about being open, I think she noticed she was bringing us down and decided to change her attitude.

LAURA: What’s really interesting to me about what you’re saying is that it seems like two different genres colliding. This actress was so used to how things are done in improv that switching to this new genre of sketch was completely disorienting to her. She is not remotely alone in that. I think one of the most important things to recognize, in any new situation, is simply that one isn’t in the genre they’re used to. Some of the skills they use to navigate this new situation will definitely come from their past, but the actual genre they produce has to shift or it’s not effective. That’s happened to me in class when we’re having a discussion and students are carrying on a side conversation. I think, “Someone should shut that student up,” and then I realize that ‘someone’ is me. I’m more familiar with being a student and not being the one to shape the conduct of the classroom.

8. *What skills have come naturally to you when you’re in charge? What are you really good at? Where do you think those beneficial skills came from? What in your past has trained you or allowed you to think in ways that are proving successful?*

LAURA: Well, one thing isn't quite training, but I'm much better one-on-one than I am talking to the whole class. I'm shy by nature, and so I want to cover every concern possible in my response quickly. So when there's confusion in the class, it's hard for me to address it without overwhelming people. But if I'm talking to one student, I can see where the confusion is coming from and then directly address that.

VANESSA: I totally know what you mean about not wanting to overwhelm people. Some of the skills that have come naturally to me when directing are helping the actors truly embrace their character. I have the ability to allow the actors to find those discoveries in the text without me telling them what it is or overwhelming them with too much material. I am able to get them out of their comfort zones and commit to their actions by side coaching. Side coaching is when the actors perform their scene, and the director coaches them through it without stopping the performance. I think this skill came from watching my Second City teachers and Illinois State University teachers do this. Being a comedian, too, has helped me reach my actors and guide them in the right direction of the scene. Learning at the Second City Training Center and watching many theatrical productions has allowed me to not be scared to go all out. I have learned that we make mistakes in order to grow and be successful, so we have to play around with our scenes to know what works. Nothing ever comes out right the first time, so why not have fun figuring out what works and what doesn't?

LAURA: That's interesting. I've actually kind of adopted a similar attitude. Realizing that I've been conditioned to be a student and not a teacher means that I need to experiment with different techniques. It's like finding the parameters of a genre. Like, I'll throw an odd-ball question out in a homework assignment with a shrug. Sometimes it doesn't work, but sometimes I get amazing and unexpected results. This is an attitude I've learned from playwriting, where you can't get precious with what you've written.

9. *What was the process like writing a Grassroots article?*

VANESSA: I'm not going to lie, writing the article has been one of the most stressful projects I have ever worked on in my life. Meeting deadlines, revising, and doing research was just a ton of work, and it got very overwhelming for me at times. At the same time, I enjoyed researching comedy and seeing how much I actually knew about it. I was very impressed with how much knowledge, effort, and work I was able to contribute to the article. I have learned how to become a better writer along with learning about the different types of writing genres. Putting up a sketch show, performing in a sketch show in Chicago, and writing an article on sketch comedy has really shown me how much momentum I am gaining as a comedian. Since receiving this

scholarship for the *Grassroots Writing Research Journal*, I have started a comedy group called The Normal Humor, been at classes at Second City, acted in a sketch show at Stage 773, and directed/wrote/produced my own sketch comedy show. These are all factors that I can use to reflect on my writing process of my original article. If it was not for my experiences outside of this writing project, then my readers would not know my qualifications. My experiences have been shaping me as the writer I am today and as the ideal person to talk to my readers about how comedic processes like this work and how comedy is a huge part of everyday life.

LAURA: That experience is not uncommon for writing a *Grassroots* article. In addition to teaching, I am also an editor for this journal, so I see a lot of early drafts. Most of the writers really have a difficult time finding the genre of the *Grassroots* article. It *looks* like the articles are just about some random genre, and so a lot of submitting writers believe anything goes. The default position is to make this a research paper. So you talking about the research you did and your *Representation* of yourself as a qualified and experienced expert is plugging right into that. I don't want to in any way imply that you're not an expert or there isn't research, but to focus, instead, on the fact that research does not equal research paper. The research paper is an *Antecedent Genre* coming through. A research paper is a specific genre (actually many specific genres, I've been horrified to find in grad school) and the articles in this journal are an entirely separate genre. In fact, the very nature of the research in this journal is different. Writers turning in more of a "research paper" tend to state lots of facts about their genre. The journal, however, studies *how* the genre functions. Like you studying effective ways to get information out to your actors, or me studying other grad students' course documents. This is a really frustrating distinction because we feel successful in our *Antecedent Genres* and switching might mean that we're failing at something. Failure, while frustrating, can actually be one of the most helpful tools in writing research. (Eric Longfellow's *Grassroots* article "Sexting" in issue 4.1 is a great model of this. His *Antecedent Genre* of fiction writing keeps interfering with his ability to seduce his girlfriend textually.) Because failing allows us to recognize that we're composing in the wrong genre—be that a text (like me for creating assignments) or a show (like your actress did)—and is the first step to being able to spot the differences between the genres. And once we can do that, we actually start becoming more effective in the genres we're composing in.



Vanessa Garcia is an undergraduate student majoring in Acting and English Studies and the 2013-14 recipient of the ISU Writing Program Grassroots Writing Research Scholarship. She started the new comedy group Registered Student Organization at Illinois State University, “The Normal Humor” in October 2013. She can also twerk like nobody’s business. If she wasn’t amazing enough, she is also a student at Second City in Chicago. In the future she hopes to be a player on *Saturday Night Live* and fulfill her dream of making people laugh around the world.



Laura Skokan is a second-year Master’s student, with a focus in creative writing. She is currently working on a graphic novel for her thesis as well as overcoming a deep-seated fear of her sewing machine. Your thoughts and prayers would be most welcome. [This bio should in no way serve as a model for genre-appropriate writing.]