Circling through Text: Teaching Research through Multigenre Writing

Peter Elbow writes that the mind has a “natural capacity for chaos and disorganization” (288). While the research paper provides a valuable model that helps writers learn to locate, organize, and synthesize information, at times we have all been disappointed with what our students produce. My neighbor returned 150 history papers to her high school juniors with the comment, “Do they think that I am so dumb that I can’t tell when they are passing off words like ‘concomitantly’ as their own?” An excellent teacher, she worries about her students’ tendency to plagiarize, their lack of writing skills, and a general apathy toward research. Is there an alternative we can offer students to kindle the imagination, draw out creativity, and convince them that there is not just one “right way” to write? For me, multigenre writing has become a powerful complement to the traditional research paper, allowing my students to develop the discipline of organizing their thoughts.

The Idea of Multigenre

Initially I was skeptical, as the idea of multigenre sounded so “loose.” How could it refine thinking and writing skills? Several of my high school colleagues recommended that I read Tom Romano’s work, Writing With Passion: Life Stories, Multiple Genres. I found it both practical and thought-provoking. Two other books, Winston Weathers’ An Alternative Style: Options in Composition and Wendy Bishop’s Elements of Alternative Style: Essays on Writing and Revision, offered added insight. I began to envision multigenre as a format that might inspire my students to reinvest themselves in research.

The concept was good, but was it possible to incorporate my requirements for a term research paper into multigenre writing? I have had to try different approaches to find out how multigenre research works best for my students. Here I retrace my steps, interweaving the voices of my former students and of Thomi Liebich, a writer and high school teacher, with my voice, to show what multigenre is, how it can be taught and assessed, and especially what makes it such a rich, workable alternative to the traditional research assignment.

What It Is...

Multigenre allows us to “meld fact, interpretation, and imagination,” into a series of self-contained pieces called crotts that appear in forms that include poetry, prose, drama, and exposition (Romano 109). These crotts, or viewpoints, according to a handout provided by Romano, are individual compositions of varying length and genre, each “making a point of its own, separated from other text by white space, unconnected . . . by transitional devices.” The author’s vision of how to present the research determines the organizational structure of the paper.

To introduce the concept of multigenre to my class, I talk with them about a current event, after which they each write a response. As we review the responses we see that, even though we may be looking at the identical situation, no two responses are necessarily the same. In fact, the combined responses resemble a collage—snapshots...
taken from different vantage points. Christina, for instance, chose to write about the author, Lois Lowry. She discovered that Lowry loves photography and tied her project together as a photo album, each crot appearing as a “shot” of Lowry’s life. She included a poem that she imagined Lowry writing about a painting of the Maine coast. Christina wrote in her rationale that she “likes to picture Lowry in this painting, reflecting on what it would be like to live in a ‘perfect’ world without . . . pain or variety.” Christina muses that, as the author of *The Giver*, Lowry would have already “carefully examined a ‘perfect society’ for herself.” In another crot Christina created a shopping list, meticulously crafted after reading biographies of Lowry. Items on her list include dog food; tortilla shells, since Lowry loves cooking and Mexican food; knitting yarn; and blue paper, as Lowry uses a different color for each revision. Christina included the rationale for choosing these items at the end of the album.

Our multigenre projects are based on extensive reading and research. While these activities help students to write convincingly about a subject, Liebich explains that the real power of the multigenre format occurs as the writer’s imagination fills out “the bones” of the researched facts. Writing in this manner, he believes, students have something to say that is often more profound than other writing that they produce.

**Developing the Assignment**

While I initially offered multigenre as an option, it is now a requirement. I refine my expectations each semester as my classes experience the research process. After selecting a topic, students conduct a close reading of primary texts and consult a broad variety of reliable sources of information. They then combine these facts with their own ideas to create a project that incorporates the crots with a source list and rationale for each plus a bibliography.

Although I have made multigenre a requirement, I do not want to lose the innovative, risk-taking behavior that students exhibit in their creative writing; yet, guidelines are very important as the novelty of the format can, as a former student, Ruth, wrote, “cause us to move out of our comfort zones.” Emily stated this risk succinctly: “I can write a good, safe analytical paper any day. Multigenre is a bit more dangerous. For me, it required investing myself more.”

In the first weeks of the semester I introduce the conceptual framework of multigenre writing by weaving in examples of authors—Dos Passos, Hulme, Ondaatje, and even the picture book author, McCauley. We approach multigenre as if it were an exotic fruit—peeling back layers of text slowly, taking time to savor everything as part of the experience of learning together. Every week we discover another use of multigenre as we study voice, perspective, grammar, and even presentation. Students bring in examples of multigenre writing that they discover during their own readings.

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By the third week of class, each student chooses an author or character associated with young adult literature. We talk about reading and rereading texts for clues to our subject. The discussion moves the expectations for research. We discuss both primary and secondary sources and ideas for surfing the Internet, as well as other sources that might be helpful. Students are encouraged to walk around the subjects, attempting to view them from all angles, until they are no longer two-dimensional, but intimate acquaintances. I currently assign at least eight crots, including a personal response, a poem, a newspaper report, a response to a work of art, and a television newscast. Many students choose to write additional crots.

We devote approximately one week to each crot. We spend part of the first class period reviewing examples of authors’ works, former students’ writing, and samples that we jointly create in class to clarify possibilities. Drafts are due in several days for peer response. The students are required to comment on and sign each other’s papers as they respond to them, a subtle message to take this time
seriously. Writing is shared with at least two peers. The peer reviewers are given specific questions to respond to, which vary with each crut: Is the tone convincing? What is your general impression of the piece? Are there confusing passages? Then the students staple initial drafts to the corrected first drafts and submit them for my comments.

During the first semester that I tried this as a whole class project, the individual drafts started coming in—but some students were struggling. They were unable to immerse themselves in a creative act and see themselves as authors. Multigenre research was still “just an assignment.” I wondered how I could get them to take the leap into investing themselves into the project.

**An Appointment with a Writer**

I called Thomi Liebich. He had just finished teaching a unit on multigenre to his high school seniors, and I hoped that he would have some insight. Since Thomi was also a creative writer, I approached him with an idea. As I had not found examples of multigenre that dealt with a character from a young adult novel, would he mind writing some samples to illustrate different viewpoints and then present them to my class? The idea intrigued him, and he agreed. He chose a book that he had enjoyed as a teenager, J. D. Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye*.

As he thought about how to explain the process that he went through to write the individual pieces, he sent me e-mail:

i want to use “on the floor” because it illustrates how to take something from the text that is only mentioned, but never described, and generate a scene—the very core of multigenre. from there, i'm planning to show how i've basically used the same idea to make up the other parts and how it requires imagination, also accuracy in research [or knowledge of the book]. is there, for example, a typewriter on holden's desk? there could be, but it's probably stradlater's—holden lent his to some other guy.

On the day of the presentation I introduce Thomi. Dressed casually in jeans, he appears self-assured, yet quiet, leaning against the desk at the front of the room as the class waits with a mixture of polite indifference and anticipation for him to begin. With carefully measured words, he puts up an overhead as he begins to read his poem, “on the floor,” an account of Holden’s furious reaction toward Stradlater upon dating his friend Jane (Salinger 40–44).

There is silence. I glance around. The initial power of this piece has roused the class and they sit forward, waiting. Intensity permeates the classroom as Thomi explains how he came to write his different viewpoints:

The writer must have something that she wants to do and say. That is for beginning writers the hardest thing. For instance, as I am writing about a person, I have to think about what he would really be like. I have tried to get into holden's head and imagine: If he is saying one thing, what is he thinking at the same time?

He continues to read aloud—a short play, more poems, an interview, a telephone conversation, a list of objects lying on holden's desk, a newspaper article—all the time continuing to comment on the writing process. The presentation ends with “the wall,” a series of haiku-like images depicting moments in holden's anguish at the untimely death of his brother, Allie. Here holden destroys the windows in his parents’ garage:

world lies quiet
in the wooden
frame:
my fist explodes
in the middle of
its peace

Quiet pervades the room, and I struggle to understand what is going on in my students’ heads. Are they reflecting on what they have heard, feeling too shy to ask questions, or what? E-mail messages show up on my server:

Thomi’s presentation . . . gave me some great ideas. Compared to his segments, mine seem lifeless and lacking. But some of the ideas he used will help me to bolster mine up.—Cory

I thought the guest speaker was great. He really gave me some ideas about what I’m going to do with my multi-genre. I’m going to make it into a 1940s style photo album, with the black pages and black-and-white photos. I hope it turns out all right. I've already bought the paper I'm going to use.—Laura

They now understand that they are to “build a bridge between a moment in the text and their own experience [with] it” (Sumara 207). Thomi’s visit serves as a catalyst for my students. His explanation of developing these viewpoints and
his reflection upon his work as a writer create a model of risk-taking that my students can emulate. As they revise and refine their writing, the tenor of their projects changes. A light has finally been switched on.

**A Time of Revision**

The writers are re-energized. They discuss their projects with me as if they have treasures hidden under their coats—the finished products will be surprises for the rest of the class. The viewpoints become personalized reflections as the students begin to comprehend what it means to write in different voices. Emily records her struggle to understand Douglas Spaulding in Ray Bradbury’s *Dandelion Wine*:

> I am a reader. What I want to be is an intimate observer, but what I am is an inevitably distant observer, kept out of your world, Douglas, by an impenetrable veil of leaves. Pages. So I am a voyeur, and I watch through a lens, a clear glass barrier—distorted. It's like looking at you through a bottle, like you’re part of the year's batch of dandelion wine.

Enthusiasm is evident as I interview each student in the middle of the semester. During this time we talk about their projects and try to decide how to make them as strong as possible. The final draft of the project is due at least ten days before semesters' end, giving me time to make last suggestions and to incorporate any peer comments into the product.

I use a four-level rubric for grading based upon Schrock's sample for research papers: novice, intermediate, proficient, distinguished. Earlier, we discussed the overarching concepts behind the project and then tried to set the criteria together as a class. For ownership, it is important to have students' input into the creation of the rubric. I've found that having very clear expectations helps my students who take comfort in guidelines. The rubric allows me to articulate expectations, be more objective and consistent in my assessment, and provide benchmarks for measuring the progress of a work. As the multigenre paper is a variable product, I am certain that my method of “grading” will change as my use of the assignment continues.

The final products are, for the most part, unique and thoughtful, the writing distanced from the students' work. My writers have finally engaged with the text that they create. They experiment with additional forms, including song lyrics, artwork, photograph albums, journals, and scrolls. Responses often take on the time period or personality of the subject. My office becomes a repository: A photo album representing the 1940s era of the Bradshaw family in *Jacob Have I Loved* nestles beside an antique container bulging with *Siddhartha*'s handmade papers and eucalyptus leaves; a red beach ball plastered with crots hangs as a vibrant reminder of the *Martian Chronicles*; and a series of construction paper purses contain the writings of the “bad” twin, Jessica Wakefield, of *Sweet Valley High* fame.

On the final day of the semester when we share our results, Scott’s remark typifies the feeling in the class: “I think even more than writing my own stuff, I really enjoyed seeing what the rest of the class created.” There is a strong sense of community, a real interest in each others’ work. Students have time to present their work in a manner that they feel comfortable with, and the class, in turn, has a chance to examine the projects. While some students choose to bring in treats and set up a table display, others simply sit on a stool and read.

It is not a perfect ending, however. There are a few students who have never had “problems” in writing traditional research papers, who continue to wrestle with the openendedness of this format. One student stated concerns: “I had difficulty with how flexible we could be. I wondered what my limitations were. How can my creation be useful?” Do we teach writing as a formula at the cost of aesthetic enjoyment? Scott felt that after so many years of traditional writing ingrained in a student’s mind . . . such an open format” was difficult to attack. Yet Scott enjoyed the project, confessing that “this format forced me to be creative and also provided me a way to express my creativity that I usually suppress behind a logical, grade-based design.” I do not have all the answers for these students but hope that I will in time. It feels good to make my students stretch.

**Spare Pieces of Reflection**

The benefits of multigenre research are still revealing themselves to me. I continue to play with the format for purely selfish reasons—the research demands rigor, the results are interesting, and the quality of writing is much truer in its feel. Ben un-
derstands that this form of research is “powerful . . . because it combines creative writing with literary analysis.” In their end-of-semester evaluations many of my students echo Charis’s remark that “this has been the most creative and enjoyable project that I have ever done.”

As I write this, a new semester is about to begin, and I am pulling out my growing supply of examples to show to a new group of students. Although I continue to refine how I “teach” multigenre, I am more confident in the outcome. When students invest themselves in a project of this nature and, as Emily observed, “fill in the gaps between the author’s words,” they can write from a “lived” experience. I believe that “the more deeply [we] read into a book,” the more we become part of the fiction (Gunnars 24). The multigenre format allows students to conduct meaningful research that they can present in a creative way. For me, the unique perspectives and the vision of my students’ work speak for themselves.

Works Cited


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EJ 40 YEARS AGO

Words of Wisdom for Teachers of Writing

“Composition begins with the need to say something; it does not and cannot begin with the workbook, the spelling exercise, the vocabulary drill, the sentence diagram, the identification of speech parts, or even the ingratiating study of the nature of language. Some of these things may have a place in a general cultural pattern, but they certainly have nothing to do with learning to write.”