The Activist Learner: Inquiry, Literacy, and Service to Make Learning Matter
Reviewed by Rachelle Savitz, University of Tennessee (rsavitz@vols.utk.edu)

Jeffrey D. Wilhelm, Whitney Douglas, and Sara W. Fry’s book discusses how to use service learning and inquiry in the classroom setting. They explain the need for this type of learning and then show readers how to incorporate various inquiry and service learning projects into classroom curriculum. They demonstrate how units focused on service learning can include higher order thinking, students’ personal interests, and the Common Core State Standards (CCSS).

The authors provide explicit definitions and examples of the various levels of service (i.e., self, others, school, community, environment, or globe) and provide a detailed list of principles of practice central to inquiry and service learning. In addition, the authors dedicate one chapter to each level of service learning and provide specific examples and “how tos” for readers. Vignettes in these chapters provide meaningful situations and practical guidelines for integrating these projects in every classroom.

Success-Oriented Learning
As the authors state, inquiry and service learning are meant to “prepare students for success (versus reacting to deficits)” (8) by using a dynamic mindset that looks at education as a means for students to continuously grow and learn. The authors provide examples from various content areas and grade levels to show that any teacher can produce authentic and relevant learning experiences by creating this type of learning environment in his or her classroom.

Inquiry and service learning projects can revolve around creating a community in the classroom, examining procedural expectations of students, or supplementing a unit of study already being implemented in the class.

The authors provide a framework for starting with what they call an existential question: “a compelling problem to be solved with personal and social consequences in the real world” (13). Such a question will address a local or global problem that students are interested in learning more about and may be willing to get involved in to make positive change. The authors rightfully emphasize the need to use authentic problems instead of hypothetical problems. This encourages students to realize that instead of complaining about problems, they can commit to figuring how to solve problems. Formative assessment is used throughout the learning process, not only for the teacher to give feedback but also to allow the students to reflect on their strengths and weaknesses and to develop next steps for achieving their personal goals.

Making Students Learning Activists
Students become learning activists by choosing their own topics and researching ways to influence the issue at hand. Then, the
teacher frontloads necessary background information and knowledge to make personal, social, and cultural connections with the students’ topic(s). Finally, the teacher and students work together to imagine ways to address the problem(s) to frame the project. This allows the students to go from being novices to experts with respect to their chosen issue, allowing them to take a position, address the issue with others, and potentially help solve real-world problems. The ultimate goal is for students to present or publish their work in communities that could be affected by the solution. Presenting their work to a real audience allows students to see how their work helped solve a problem.

The authors describe and demonstrate three approaches to starting a service learning and inquiry process in the classroom: (1) listening to the students’ desires, (2) discussing specific problems and asking them for their input, or (3) having students conduct independent research and identify possible service learning projects. The authors also provide many tables and figures to guide novice educators through the process, and they provide specific prompts for each type of service learning project. In addition, related materials and helpful information are available free on the Teachers College Press website.

Supporting the Teachers

Through the authors’ personal experiences and discussions with teachers, they are able to show how using service learning inquiry and projects is rewarding not only for students but also for teachers. By partnering with peers, faculty colleagues, community members, university faculty, and local and global organizations, students and teachers are actively engaged in learning that could lead to lifelong collaboration and activism.

One concern I have after reading this book is that nearly all the educators whose work was portrayed as exemplary were part of the Boise State Writing Project or the National Writing Project. These teachers were provided a great deal of support, mentoring, guidance, feedback, training, and opportunities for collaboration. Not all schools and educators will have access to these kinds of benefits. Descriptions of how the authors dealt with various obstacles can address this concern, but new teachers incorporating service learning will need support throughout the process, especially with students who might not be accustomed to being so involved in their own education.

The Activist Learner: Inquiry, Literacy, and Service to Make Learning Matter offers a realistic, step-by-step process that any teacher wishing to incorporate service learning and inquiry projects could use as a guide. The book demonstrates how English language arts teachers can use the themes, ideas, and settings of texts and novels already used in many ELA classrooms to incorporate service learning and inquiry. Students will be accountable and responsible for their own learning, and this process will motivate and engage them to a degree that is not seen in many curricula currently being used for all students.

Fearless Writing: Multigenre to Motivate and Inspire


Reviewed by Amy Baird, Horizon Science Academy, Columbus High School, Columbus, Ohio (alb113@zips.uakron.edu)

Imaginative, creative, passionate: these are words writing teachers love. The Common Core State Standards, however, emphasize terms such as informative, academic, evidence-based. We’ll all nod in agreement—those characteristics are important as well, and they have their place. But at the cost of imagination and creativity? At the cost of the principles and practices that impelled many writing teachers to become writing teachers?

Tom Romano thinks not.

In his new book on the multigenre project, Fearless Writing: Multigenre to Motivate and Inspire, he encourages teachers and students to embrace imagination and creativity along with argument and narrative. As teachers wrestle with how to meet standards in their classrooms, some may feel they must give up creative lessons and activities they love, but Romano says otherwise. His book is not just the theory and
how-to of teaching multigenre: It is multigenre. He uses his subject matter to convey what he writes about: the teaching of and benefits of multigenre research projects, a paper composed of multiple genres and subgenres that hangs together as a unified piece. He challenges the notion that genres such as poetry and flash fiction are not academically rigorous. He provides new ways teachers can incorporate creative writing into their classes through his style of research, as well as how to encourage critical thinking, revision, and creativity.

Romano begins his book with Walt Whitman: “I am large, I contain multitudes.” He describes the history of multigenre, opening with an example, and refers readers to a website with more examples and practical resources. He describes how he prepares students for a multigenre project as well as the genres and subgenres students can try. Knowing teachers, he includes practical ideas, assignments, and activities. He discusses the bane of many teachers’ existence—evaluation and grading. And then he tackles the Common Core State Standards for writing, addressing their good points and, more importantly, their flaws.

Going Beyond the Standards

While Romano admits having much to like about the Standards, such as clarity, coherence, and use of research, he also believes “the Standards’ vision for writing is narrow, biased, incomplete” (182). Essentially, they are incomplete because they dismiss any writing that is not exposition, despite nodding to narrative by singling it out from argumentative and informative texts. Romano especially protests a particular “shaded, boxed bit of language” located in the appendix stating that the narrative category doesn’t include other genres of creative writing such as poetry, and the teaching of those forms is left to teacher discretion. Romano finds this box “placating and dismissive” and he questions why the Standards would give creative writing second-class status (185). He doesn’t claim to know the answer, but whatever the reason, he resists, for “creativity, regardless of the genre being written, is the heart of linguistic expression . . . whether writing a poem, a position paper, or a grocery list” (184). Creativity matters regardless of genre, and Romano shows this by detailing the many Standards that multigenre meets—and exceeds.

Through a multigenre journey of interviews, poems, quotes, letters, anecdotes, dreams, examples, advice, and multiple threads that tie it all together, Romano aims to show his readers how multigenre has the power to “reach the readers’ minds and emotions” (20), to combine “fact and imagination,” and to become “the merger of heart and mind” (179). Fearless writing is not only about testing the boundaries of traditional writing assignments; it’s about testing the boundaries of teaching. It’s at the heart of multigenre to realize the power of imagination and the role that creativity and expression play in all forms of writing, including analytical, argumentative, and explanatory.

After reading Fearless Writing, not many would doubt the “academic rigor” behind multigenre writing. “Multigenre writers plan, write, plan anew, write more, revise, survey their production of genres, begin organizing them” (125). This process is the dream of a writing teacher; however, Romano doesn’t idealize it. He is realistic. He knows that “students develop a truncated writing process that gets papers written but not always with the craft they are capable of” (175). That is, multigenre won’t necessarily solve all the problems of procrastination that keep students up at night, scrambling to rewrite introductions and insert transitions—but it might help. Romano writes about his mistakes, his regrets, and his realizations. He writes about the student who responded “Don’t assign it” on a self-assessment about the multigenre project (174). Romano is relatable. He will make you laugh aloud, nod in commiseration, sigh in relief, and maybe even cry.

Wanting to Want to Read Student Writing

My career as a writing teacher is just beginning, but I can already feel myself not wanting to sit down and read what my students write. I can already feel myself becoming bored with my assignments. But Romano made me realize something. I want to want to read what my students write. I don’t want to become complacent or satisfied with the status quo, as Romano warns against. In the spirit of Holden Caulfield, he writes, “[W]hen you stop paying attention to detail, when you start relying on autopilot, the quality of your work will fall off, the passion
you once had will turn phony. As a teacher, you won’t be as good anymore” (167). As I read this passage, I thought: That’s what multigenre is all about. It’s about engaging the process of being a writing teacher; in other words, being open to new strategies and feeling out what will help students flourish, even—especially—if it’s something completely new.

This is writing to discover at its finest. I think any writing teacher, from elementary to college, can benefit from reading Fearless Writing. In an era of standards that “want writing that’s all head, no heart,” high school English teachers can use multigenre to both meet those standards and challenge them for what they’re missing (187). Perhaps most importantly, Romano’s book will cause teachers to reflect on teaching. Readers will be immersed in poetry for an hour, then wondering where the time has gone. And by the end, readers will feel as if they’ve made a new friend. A new friend who writes with a wire-haired fox terrier, named Whitman, beside him.

Rachelle Savitz is a doctoral student in Literacy Studies at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville. She can be contacted at rsavitz@vols.utk.edu. Amy Baird received her master’s degree in English Composition and TESOL endorsement from The University of Akron. She currently teaches English as a Second Language at a charter school in Columbus, Ohio. She can be reached at alb113@zips.uakron.edu.

how to write a poem about bukowski

with eyes deep-set
in a pock-marked face
sat his ghost, reeking of verse and puke
and other things.
he rolled his yellow eyes and told me to get the hell out of there.
interview kerouac
or ferlinghetti, he growled.
they’re almost as depraved as i am.
when i refused, he frowned and belched up stale whiskey and hookah smoke.
go back home, he said.
back to your wife and suburbia and your catholic school kids.
you’re not worthy to write a poem about me.
but, in your stupidity, if you insist, then do what I say:
stop two doors down where the bad girls live.
when you’ve been bitten and slathered by their dogs and you’re drunk and stoned and collapsed into a pitiful rag, then pull yourself out of the puddle that was you, chew the end of a pencil till you gag on the graphite and write down what you’ve suffered.
and then write down what you’ve relinquished to this pitiful world.
don’t forget to mention the girls.
and, lastly, tell about the armpit of suburbia that you have to return to.
then you will have your stinking poem about bukowski.
now, get the hell out of here.

—bill eldridge
© 2014 by William F. Eldridge

Bill Eldridge teaches Pre-AP English I at John Paul II High School in Plano, Texas. Teaching is his second career after having served as a pilot for a major air carrier. He briefly taught as an adjunct at a community college. He has been teaching in high school since 2007. Bill Eldridge has been a member of NCTE since 2014. Email: williameldridge@johnpauliihs.org.