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Making Research Real: The Multi-Genre Research Project

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Directions: Read each of the following selections carefully. After you finish, circle the reaction that best corresponds with your personal reaction to the reading.

Example 1:

Students sit at tables in the media center, avidly reading copies of encyclopedia articles as they research topics for their research papers. They highlight most of the articles and copy the information word-for-word onto note cards. Then they sit down with the highlighted copies and thesauri, finding new words to replace some of the verbs in the original articles. As you give lessons about how to quote information and use in-text citation, they tune out. When you check in their outlines, their theses all look very similar: "In this report I am going to talk about ——."

A. Is this a horror movie preview? I want to run screaming from the media center.
B. This is slightly painful. I'd prefer a different scenario that doesn't involve plagiarism.
C. This isn't part of my dream picture, but it's part of the research paper process.
D. Woo hoo! Give me more! I love it when the thesis is that clear.

Example 2:

Your students have been working on their research papers for the last few weeks. They just turned in their final copies, and you've hunkered down to grade a stack of them over the weekend. The first one was disappointing—poor sentence structure, no voice, and plagiarized sections. After giving the student a low grade, you look at the author's name and remind yourself that this student didn't work much during class time. You read the second paper. The monotone voice frustrates you, as does the choppy organization of the sentences and the unusual and uneven word choice. This student obviously used a thesaurus to replace different words from an encyclopedia since many of the new words are incorrect choices. This paper also scores low, and you are surprised to find out it belongs to your top writer.

After two hours of grading, the papers don't get any better. You think maybe it's because you didn't teach them how to use voice well enough. But then you remember that their narratives and short stories were full of voice. You can't chalk it up to having forced topics because each student got to choose something she or he was interested in. You just can't shake how bad these papers are, and you don't know how on earth you're going to read fifty more extended five-paragraph essays that basically rephrase or plagiarize an encyclopedia or website.

A. This is my worst nightmare. Please end my misery now
B. I've been there, sister, and I'd like to avoid the situation at all costs.
C. This isn't so bad. Besides, students need to write a research paper.
D. This is what I live for! Now I can use those 500 red pens I bought at Staples!

If you chose either "A" or "B" for both selections, you probably agree with me when I say that the traditional research paper no longer fits in an educational world emphasizing Best Practices. The process is relatively mindless: students pull some facts from a source and plug them into the extended-five-paragraph format, which is the equivalent of rewriting the information in its original format. The whole process becomes an enormous "busywork" assignment because students merely transfer facts from the encyclopedia to note cards, from note cards to an outline, from outline to a draft, and from draft to the final copy. Many don't even bother to put the information in their own words, keeping a source's

original sentences and substituting a few larger words from a thesaurus here and there.

I think much of the problem is that the traditional research paper format doesn't relate to what we cover in our literature-based classrooms. After all, how many research reports or formal essays do we read as a class? In my classes, rarely do we read anything formatted like an impersonal formal essay, with the thesis at the end of the first paragraph, followed by the three points and a conclusion that restates the thesis. In fact, the only time I encounter formal essay writing is in my graduate classes; I don't see it at all in my everyday reading. Because the traditional research paper follows this unfamiliar format, students don't place any value in the assignment—and I can't blame them. What we teachers need to decide, then, is whether the purpose of the research writing is to teach the format of the formal research paper or how to use research in writing. Personally, I believe the latter is much more important.

I'm not suggesting that we throw out research writing—because learning how to research and make judgments about the findings are very important skills. I am, however, suggesting that we replace the traditional research paper with something more relevant to what students learn throughout the year. In *Methods That Matter*, Harvey Daniels and Marilyn Bizar propose that

> [k]nowledge cannot remain external, inert, untouched. Learners must do something with information: connect it, draw it, weigh it, manipulate it—metaphorically, they need to grab ideas by the throat and demand that they make sense" (114).

As a teacher, I don't want my students to merely memorize their research; I want them to analyze it and synthesize it. I don't care if they can rewrite an encyclopedia word-for-word on a piece of paper. I want them to use their brains and wrestle with their research until it becomes a part of them.

My main goal as an English teacher is to help my students develop into better writers, and I find that the traditional research paper contradicts all that I teach and believe about writing. The impersonal format breeds voiceless regurgitation of facts. The objectivity of the assignment kills voice and stifles creativity. I want to hear my students' voices in their writing, and I want to see them using skills and genres that we've covered throughout the year. I don't teach students how to analyze and use suspense, dialogue, figurative language, characterization, and free verse just to abandon the skills once a unit is over. If I expect my students to develop these writing and analytical skills, then I need to offer more opportunities to use them, something that the traditional research paper format does not do. Therefore, in my American literature course, I have exchanged the old research assignment for a more functional one: *the multi-genre research paper.*

I have found that Tom Romano's multi-genre paper works wonders as a replacement for the traditional research paper. The multi-genre paper is

> a complex, multilayered, multivoiced blend of genres, each revealing information about [a] topic, each self-contained, making a point of its own, unconnected to other genres by conventional transitional device (*Blending* 4).

In my classroom, each student must research an American author, a task that includes finding biographical information and reading a book by the author, and write a project that includes the following parts: a preface; a review for the book the student read; an annotated bibliography; a non-textual piece; and four to six genres of the student's choice, all tied together by a recurring image or theme. In the multi-genre research project, students use the information gathered from their research and the books they read to create snippets of their authors' lives.

Romano's multi-genre paper makes students craft their research in their own words, through multiple viewpoints and different genres. It requires higher-order thinking because students must create original pieces, which in turn eliminates the opportunity to plagiarize their sources. Students

must make their writing and learning distinctly their own. They are expected to use voice and unity, as well as experiment with audience, point of view, and other literary devices that we cover throughout the year. Most importantly, the unique format asks students to go beyond the comfortable realm of voiceless, formulaic writing and asks them to put themselves on the line. This makes both writing and learning more challenging, more interesting, and more meaningful, in addition to acknowledging "that there are many ways to see the world, many ways to show others what we see" (Romano *Writing,* 130).

Reproducing research in the traditional research paper format is not enough for today's world. Students need to understand that research—and life—involves more than objective fact analysis. As Romano states in *Blending Genres, Altering Style*, "No matter what professions [students] enter, facts and analysis are not enough. If our decisions are to be both sound and humane, we need to understand emotion and circumstance, as well as logic and outcome. Writing in many genres helps minds learn to do that" (57). We need to help our students think in both the objective and subjective worlds as they research and write in order to help them become creative problem-solvers.

My students have loved the multi-genre research paper. One student told me that "this is the most exciting and fun report I have ever done." Another student complained that he had never worked so hard on a paper before in his life—and that he was thrilled with the results. He is now an avid reader of Charles Baxter (the author he researched) and continues to seek out information about his author's life. A female student hoped she would get another chance to write a multi-genre paper during the next school year, and one of her classmates said he really appreciated being able to use his research in a "more creative and way more interesting" format. Another student told me that she felt she "finally understood how to condense [her] writing and use details in poetry." Those comments, along with over half of my students urging me to convert other teachers to this type of research writing, were very reassuring.

Do not think for a moment that I didn't have students who disliked the project. There were a number of students who disagreed with research writing in general, regardless of the format. I also had a few students wish they could have written the traditional research report. One student explained that she preferred traditional papers because she didn't have to go back and think about the things we learned earlier in the year. Another specifically said, "I wish we wrote regular research papers. This paper made me think too hard, and I don't usually think much when I write research reports." To me, these comments, in addition to the amazing work they turned in as their final projects, validate the multi-genre paper: students are thinking, creating from research, becoming better writers, and taking ownership and pride in their work. What more could a teacher want?

For those who are willing to throw out the traditional research paper for something more meaningful, I suggest reading Tom Romano's *Blending Genre, Altering Style: Writing Multigenre Papers*. This book is my Bible as I begin my fourth year of teaching the multi-genre research paper. It offers ideas for explaining, planning, teaching, and grading the project, as well as supplemental mini-lessons. He also includes elementary, secondary, and post-secondary examples of multi-genre papers that can be shown to students as models. The nice thing about Romano's book is that his clear instructions and examples read more like a story than an educational text. The chapters correlate to different parts of the project, making it easy to quickly review a section before teaching it.

Switching to this style of reporting has made the research assignment much more worthwhile and valuable than the traditional format. I reap the benefits because I read sixty original projects in sixty different formats, all showcasing different aspects of authors' lives. Between genre choice and different perspectives of a person's life, even multiple research projects on one author are ever alike. Students, however, have the better end of the deal. They create the layout of their report, so they can incorporate genres that emphasize their writing

strengths or they can experiment with genres they've always wanted to try. They evaluate their research and choose those sections that are most interesting, rather than trying to rehash everything they know about an author. They also take a more active role in their learning by asking questions about genre, style, punctuation, and grammar when they are ready to learn it and use it.

If you aren't convinced that the multi-genre project is for you, let me share just one more scenario with you. Again, circle the reaction that is closest to yours.

EXAMPLE 3:

I sit at my dining room table grading multi-genre papers. The first one is about Walt Whitman and the phrase "Leaves of Grass" connects the whole project. It includes an interview with the poet about how his life appears in *Leaves of Grass*, an editorial about *Song of Myself*, a narrative about visiting soldiers in a hospital, and a poem about Whitman writing *Leaves of Grass*. Then I open the plastic case at the back of the folder and put the CD in my CD player. A beautiful guitar melody floats out of the speakers, reminding me of sitting on the beach at Lake Michigan in the evening. The song, written and performed by my student, is a musical rendition of Whitman's poem "Song at Sunset." I'm amazed, but not surprised because this is one of my top students.

Much later, I grade a paper by one of my students who regularly resists every writing and reading assignment we have. I open his project on Edgar Allan Poe with the hope that he fulfilled all of the basic requirements of the project. He starts off with an intricate and shadowy charcoal drawing of a cemetery and what he imagines Poe's gravestone looks like, followed with an obituary. The rest of the project has a flashback feel that focuses on the tragedies in Poe's life. There are a number of journal entries about fighting depression after his wife's death, a dialogue between him and his adoptive father after getting kicked out of West Point, and a short story about the dark voices inspiring his stories. Not only did this student do the required writing, but he obviously did a lot of research and found some kind of connection with his author as well. The writing was full of such melancholy, fitting perfectly with the brooding picture of Poe on the cover of the report. I am thrilled by this student's progress, and am eager to see the next project reveals about both the student and the researched author. Unfortunately, I only have ten more projects left to grade.

A. Original writing? Kids getting into their research? Working with themes? Sign me up!
B. This sound more interesting to read, and the examples are intriguing. It's worth a try.
C. Sounds like I have to do too much thinking as I'm grading. No thanks.
D. No thesis? No cookie cutter organization? No regurgitation? No way!

With this project, the students really do immerse themselves their research and take ownership for their education. They are eager to try new styles of writing, to showcase their writing strengths, and to show off what they learned about their authors and writing. To me, this is what teaching is all about—making learning relevant and real.

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