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Literate Lives: Connecting Literature with Multigenre Writing

It is the first day of English class. We have gathered our desks into a tight circle and nervously eye each other. This is it. Twenty-one strangers soon to be joined together as a community. I ask them to name their favorite books and am delighted to hear them call out *To Kill a Mockingbird*, *Brave New World*, *Persepolis*, and anything by J.K. Rowling. Ah, I think, this is a community of true readers, true lovers of literature. They like classic literature, science-fiction, graphic novels, and adolescent texts. When this first class ends, I am confident we will enjoy hours of stimulating discussion, inspired writing, and blissful literature-loving communion.

What has happened to my students, my self-proclaimed lovers of literature?

Just three short weeks later, my confidence has faded. Our room is no longer filled with voices speaking loudly and quickly, voices which interrupt one another in excitement and anticipation. Instead, our conversation is stilted by long pauses, monosyllabic answers, and blank, staring eyes. What has happened to my students, my self-proclaimed lovers of literature? One might argue that such behavior is not unusual. The beginning-of-the-semester, eager-to-please attitudes have simply given way to my students' "real" personalities. After all, this class is comprised of students interested in academic fields including biology, psychology, Spanish, and business. Few of these young people intend to become language arts educators, English scholars or creative writers. One might claim that it was only a matter of time before these students became disengaged with English, just one more subject to learn in a long list of graduation requirements.

While I know some degree of student apathy or disinterest may be present in any classroom on any given day, I still feel dismayed and disheartened to see it happen in my room. These are students who claim to enjoy reading not just any text, but complex and controversial ones like *To Kill a Mockingbird* and *Persepolis*. Surely my students' apathy is not connected to the texts assigned for my class. We are not taking on onerous tasks such as translating ancient Greek tragedies; instead, we are reading contemporary authors such as Flannery O'Connor, Billy Collins, Marge Piercy, and Alice Se-

bold. I begin to wonder if some other reason exists to explain my students' drastic change in attitude toward reading and discussing literature. Specifically, I wonder how the writing tasks I assign affect students' reading behaviors. That is, how do my assignments help or hinder my students from leading literate lives?

Formal Study of Literature + Academic Writing = Literary Analysis

As I reflect on my students' reading attitudes, I realize that class discussion begins to wane and long sighs seem to fill the room right around the time I dole out their first formal writing assignment, the literary analysis. A four to eight page essay, this assignment meets typical content and style guidelines for the analysis genre. It must contain a clear thesis discussing a character, literary element, or theme; specific evidence from the literary text must be cited in MLA style; evidence and ideas must be organized; voice and language must reflect a scholarly tone; and rules of style and grammar must be followed. While students are allowed to choose which literary work(s) and which literary element(s) they wish to analyze, the way in which they will synthesize these ideas onto the page is predetermined; they must write an analysis.

I choose this genre of writing based on Michigan English Language Arts Content Expectations. According to these standards, students ought to read and analyze various genres of literature and approach such analyses by drawing on critical perspectives (Michigan Department of Education 11). The literary analysis, then, seems to be a genre well suited for students to practice such critical, close readings of literature.

Yet, as I reflect more deeply on my classroom, I am reminded that most students take this class simply to fulfill a general education requirement. My students' interests and attitudes make me question this essay I so dutifully assign. For these students, who do not intend on becoming literary critics, literary scholars, or language arts educators, is the literary analysis truly the best way to promote the formal study of literature I am required to teach? Is it fair of me to assess such students on a style of writing that has little, if any, relevance in their academic and professional lives?

Assessing Writing, Assessing Attitudes

Vicki Spandel (2005), co-author of the widely practiced 6-trait model for writing assessment and instruction, urges writing instructors to assess with compassion, perception, and usefulness. She explains, "The perceptive response is not the same as the right response...Such assessment goes beyond cosmetics to the underlying meaning and structure..." (p. 94). As an instructor, I fear I look more often for the right response rather than the perceptive one in my students' formal writing. My literary analysis rubric emphasizes this. Essays are evaluated on the following criteria:

- Writing is built around a claim, interpretation or main theme you are making about the text.
- Writing presents relevant, detailed explanation to support your central claim in an organized structure.
- Lines/words from the text are used as evidence and are incorporated fluidly into the essay.
- Writing is error-free.

Assessment according to this rubric, then, is based on students placing the "right" ideas into the "right" structure. Student perception – finding an interesting or controversial reading of the literature – is not given credence.

Spandel (2005) also asserts that writing assessment be compassionate and useful. She calls for assessment practices, which seek "not to find fault, but to uplift – to genuinely help writers;" further, assessment ultimately "should be designed to serve first and foremost student writers" (p. 94). In *Because Writing Matters*, National Writing Project (NWP) authors (2003) concur that assessment must be useful in saying, "For teachers and students, assessment should have an instructional purpose, not simply an evaluative or administrative one" (p. 76). For me, the analytic essay exists primarily as an administrative tool: I use this formal writing assignment to assess my students' skills in writing, synthesizing ideas, and proving their knowledge of a literary text.

This call for compassionate, perceptive, and useful assessors makes me question my own teaching practices. Is my assessment of the literary analysis fair to my students? By assigning a grade to this essay, am I rewarding those students who have better skills working with this particular genre and/or are naturally gifted formal writers? Is such an assessment practice unfair to those students who have wonderful, perceptive reactions to the assigned literature but cannot fit such reactions into this prescribed format? How does such assessment help, or hinder, my students from living truly authentic literate lives?

Perhaps many of my students feel disadvantaged by this form of assessment. Perhaps this writing assignment not only affects students' attitudes toward

writing, but also their attitudes toward reading. Within my classroom, it is only when the literary analysis is assigned that students show apathy, participating listlessly in classroom discussions. These students, who a mere three weeks earlier claimed to enjoy reading, no longer seem personally invested in the class or in the literary texts. I cannot help but wonder if the impending formal essay causes them to read in a different, less compelling manner.

Different Reading Experiences

Louise Rosenblatt (1938), founder of reader response criticism, views the reader and text as explicitly connected. In fact, she maintains that one cannot exist apart from the other; literary meaning can only be created when the two interact. In *Literature as Exploration*, she writes, "A novel or poem or play remains merely inkspots on paper until a reader transforms them into a set of meaningful symbols. The literary work exists in the live circuit set up between reader and text" (p. 25). This "live circuit" can also be imagined as "an event." In *The Reader, the Text, the Poem*, Rosenblatt (1978) explains, "The poem, then, must be thought of as an event in time. It is not an object or an ideal entity. It happens during a coming-together, a compenetration, of a reader and a text" (p. 12). In this reader response model, the literary work and the reader must interact authentically. That is, "the reader infuses intellectual and emotional meanings into the pattern of verbal symbols, and those symbols channel his thoughts and feelings" (p. 25). The reader, then, must make some kind of personal connection with the text he/she reads, be it emotional, psychological, spiritual, intellectual, artistic, or so forth. When such an authentic connection is made, the reader experiences what Rosenblatt (1978) calls an "aesthetic" experience. She states, "In aesthetic reading, the reader's attention is centered directly on what he is living through during his relationship with that particular text" (p. 25).

An aesthetic reading is what I hope all my students experience. In such a reading, students might feel inspired, troubled, energized, elated, depressed, calmed, or any thrilling combinations of such emotions. In other words, students feel; they personally and authentically connect to the literary text. At the beginning of the semester, many of my students seemed to have experienced such aesthetic readings. They came to class angry with certain characters, troubled by conflicts left unresolved in stories, and eager to share their ideas verbally with others. Such enthusiasm and energy dissipated, however, as the literary analysis writing process began.

One explanation for my students' change in attitude could be that they no longer were reading aesthetically. Perhaps they were approaching literature from what Rosenblatt (1978) terms a nonaesthetic or "efferent" perspective. She explains, "In nonaesthetic reading, the reader's attention is focused primarily on what will remain as the residue after the reading – the information to be acquired, the logical solution to a problem, the actions to be carried out" (p. 23). In such a reading, making a personal connection is forgotten; rather, the reader searches the text for the "right" answer. Nonaesthetic reading is certainly necessary in many circumstances: to solve a proof in geometry, to read an owner's manual, or to follow driving directions. In the literature classroom, however, nonaesthetic reading can inhibit students from discovering the rich and layered meanings any one text might hold. Instead, students might simply search the text for the "right" answer, which in this case might be a thesis statement for the assigned literary analysis.

Multiple Genres for Multiple Readers

If, as Rosenblatt suggests, my students were no longer aesthetic readers, how might I encourage them to re-connect with literary texts as well as hold them accountable with fairly administrated writing assessments? One obvious solution would be to abandon the formal literary analysis, assuming this assignment caused my students so much anxiety they could no longer read aesthetically. Yet, what about my course requirements - students must engage in critical, close readings of literature? What about my own philosophy of teaching literature, which values thinking critically, personally, and creatively about texts and requires students to express such knowledge through written and verbal communication?

In an attempt to meet my school's academic requirements, my students' aesthetic desires, and my personal literature pedagogy, I created a new type of writing assignment: the multigenre project. Modeled after Tom Romano's multigenre research paper, this project allowed students to respond to literature from several perspectives by writing in various modes. This model was first used by Romano (2000) when he asked his students to rethink traditional research activities that included other genres. The National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) claims there is much "to be gained" from multigenre research: "Student work must consistently reflect the facts gained from thorough research, yet the creative outlet often generates enthusiasm for research and writing. Most teachers -- and students alike -- would also agree that it's fun" (<http://www.ncte.org/profdev/online/ideas/freq/114026.htm>). After

reading Romano's *Blending Genre, Altering Style*, and seeing the documented literature that multigenre writing improves students' attitudes toward research writing, I wondered if this model might help my students regain their love for literature, their desire to connect aesthetically with our required readings. I decided to in-

Figure 1: Literature Circle Multigenre Project Requirements:

- Project includes a preface that explains its theme, the text discussed, group members, and any other relevant introductory information.
- Each member creates one source-based page
- Each member creates one creative response (more than one creative response may be on one page).
- All pages are clearly connected to the project's theme.
- Outside resources are properly cited.
- Project includes external and internal links, where relevant.
- Project should be equivalent to 12 typed pages.

clude two multigenre projects as a trial run in my class. The first project was a collaborative one, which students completed after reading a text with a literature circle group. Students read a memoir together, discussed the text, and culminated their discussion by creating a multigenre wiki project described in Figure 1.

After completing this collaborative multigenre project, seventeen of the nineteen students in the class reported that, if given the choice, they preferred to compose this type of text rather than a formal, traditional essay. One student liked the "flexibility" of this project because he was able "to use the genre that let me best describe." Another student said that writing in multiple genres helped her "understand the text better by

Figure 2: Individual Multigenre Project:

- Project must be based on a unifying theme.
- Project should examine at least 2 texts not previously addressed in writing assignments.
- Project should be the equivalent of 8 pages, minimum, and use four genres, minimum.
- An introduction identifying project's theme and texts studied should be included.
- Finally, the project should conclude with author's notes which explain how all the elements of the project are connected, your motivation for studying this theme, and/or how you decided to use certain genres for certain purposes (see example handout).
- Proper MLA citation is expected.

looking deeper into the story.” Finally, a third student, who became intrigued with adding visual elements to her group’s project explained, “It was nice to do more than just write. I could explain my ideas better with pictures than with words.”

Encouraged by the students’ positive feedback as well as the creative, visual, and critical writing they produced, I decided to allow students to choose between a critical analysis and a second (independent) multigenre project as the semester’s final assignment. Sixteen of nineteen students opted to compose an individual multigenre project, as described in Figure 2.

But Is This REAL Writing?

When I look at my students’ multigenre projects, I am awed and amazed. Their visual and written portrayals of their connections to literary texts, are surprising, insightful, and beautiful. For example, one student who is interested in psychology researched mental disorders to “diagnose” characters in memoirs and stories. The memoir *Lucky*, which recounts the author’s experience being raped as a college freshman, inspired another student to create “If it happened to you.” This wiki-article offered students on her campus practical advice and local resources for rape victim support. Such writing affirmed that students were connecting to the literature they read in personal, authentic ways. While I found value in such writing, in the aesthetic reading experience this writing encouraged, I was a bit nervous about sharing these projects with my colleagues. What might other English instructors think of the scrapbooks, collages, poems, letters, and wikis that my students are writing “instead of” the traditional, formal essay?

Dr. Nancy Mack (2002) shares a similar sentiment. When she received her students’ multigenre projects she admitted, “I was so pleased that I took them to a faculty meeting and subversively arranged them on the center table in the hopes that their merit alone would convince my colleagues of the value of this type of assignment” (p. 91). Like Mack, I am often tempted to “show-off” my students’ exquisite, non-traditional writing. However, multigenre writing pedagogy embodies more than the simple desire for students to play, write creatively, or do something new. According to Mack, multigenre projects offer students opportunities to create an aesthetic connection between life and art. Mack refers to Mikhail Bakhtin’s definition of aesthetic unity in summarizing, “...for writing to reach the level of art, it must bring the writer integrity by expressing a momentary answer for the unique experiences that are meaningful in the artist’s life” (p. 96). That is, students are able to write more than the formulaic essay, the required assessment, when their writing connects directly to their own life experiences.

Within my classroom, one student composed a multigenre project connecting contemporary poetry to relationships within her family. Another student traced her experiences reading and discussing certain texts to create a “How to Appreciate Poetry Manual” for future literature students. While such projects in no way look or sound like a traditional essay, these types of writing do evidence critical thinking, personal relevance, practical application, and careful composing. My experiences teaching multigenre writing echo those of Dr. Mack (2002), who asserts, “Multigenre writing has worked in my classroom because students have been able to use this assignment to write artfully and skillfully about things that matter in their lives” (p. 98).

What about assessing such writing? Might such projects help me be the assessor Vicki Spandel (2005) calls all writing instructors to be – compassionate, perceptive, and useful? My answer is yes, yes, and yes. When my students create texts of personal relevance, how can I not be compassionate? When such texts offer new insights on literary works I thought I knew thoroughly, my perception as well as the students’ is raised. Finally, anytime a student connects literature to life, this connection must be considered useful. In fact, Rosenblatt (1978) might even consider such connection as the ultimate aesthetic experience. For my students, these multigenre projects allow opportunities to personalize their reading and writing experiences. Leading a literate life, then, no longer entails producing formulaic responses to assigned texts. Instead, students do much more than simply read literature; they also imaginatively create literature of their own.

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