2001

Leaving Regular Behind: Finding Passion and Creativity in Multigenre Research

Jamie Hopkins

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.gvsu.edu/lajm>

Recommended Citation

Hopkins, Jamie (2001) "Leaving Regular Behind: Finding Passion and Creativity in Multigenre Research," *Language Arts Journal of Michigan*: Vol. 17: Iss. 1, Article 2.
Available at: <https://doi.org/10.9707/2168-149X.1330>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by ScholarWorks@GVSU. It has been accepted for inclusion in Language Arts Journal of Michigan by an authorized editor of ScholarWorks@GVSU. For more information, please contact scholarworks@gvsu.edu.

Leaving Regular Behind: Finding Passion and Creativity in Multigenre Research

Jamie Hopkins

"Hopkins, why can't we do a regular research paper?"

I smile to myself. I know what comes next.

"It would be so much easier!"

After only two years of teaching, this is a conversation that I know well. Half of the one semester College English class that I teach at Central Montcalm High School is devoted to the creation of a multigenre research paper. During the past couple of years, my students and I have tinkered with this idea, and we have all come to the same conclusion: It is much tougher for these college-bound students to write a paper in the multigenre form than in the traditional expository form. In the beginning, this leads to frustration—and many questions—on the students' part. Why did we spend so much time perfecting the introduction-body-conclusion form if we can't use it for the biggest research project of our language arts history? Why do we have to write creatively in College English? Why make things so difficult, Mrs. Hopkins?

A Multigenre History

I first encountered the concept of multigenre writing at the MCTE fall conference in 1997. Tom Romano was the keynote speaker, and I was im-

pressed by his enthusiasm for teaching and writing as he spoke about encouraging kids to write in multiple genres and touched on the idea of multigenre research. After the keynote, I attended a session led by two teachers from Ithaca High School. They described a version of the multigenre project that they assign in their classes, and I continued to be intrigued by this complex yet exciting alternative to the traditional research paper. As I was not yet teaching, I filed the idea and the handouts away for future reference.

In the fall of 1998, I again encountered this idea. My supervising teacher at Greenville High School described a multigenre biography project that he particularly enjoyed completing with the kids. Loaded up with even more information and examples, I decided to give the multigenre project a try as soon as I could.

And give it a try I did. Three times now I have taken my College English students into the world of the multigenre research paper. The writing that my students produce during the course of this project is easily the most creative writing that I see each semester. I am convinced that this project is far more valuable for my college-bound students than the traditional research paper.

The multigenre research paper is a concept that was originated by Tom Romano after he read and fell in love with Michael Ondaatje's *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid*. Ondaatje's biography of Billy the Kid is based on facts that he was able to research about the Kid's life. However, rather than sharing his findings in the traditional biographical or novel format, Ondaatje wrote individual pieces of varying genre that, when read in succession, form one story. Romano succinctly describes multigenre works like Ondaatje's: "Each piece is self-contained, making a point of its own, and is not connected to any of the others by conventional transitional devices" ("A Time . . . " 2).

Suddenly, the research paper is alive with possibilities, and students are invited to tap into their creativity to produce meaningful pieces of writing.

Because of the various genres used, the multigenre research paper is unique not only in format, but also in process. Rather than researching a topic and regurgitating the facts in expository form, the student must thoroughly research his or her subject, interpret the information uncovered, and decide which genres most effectively unveil necessary information or insights. This is what Romano aptly calls "melding fact, interpretation and imagination" (Writing 109).

The multigenre research project has opened up new opportunities for my students. No longer is the research paper filled with the drudgery of deciding how to best restate without plagiarizing the information found during the course of research. With this project, students choose topics that are important to them, become immersed in the subject, and use higher order thinking to weave a variety of genres together to build stories about their subjects. Suddenly, the research paper is alive with possibilities, and students are invited to tap into their creativity to produce meaningful pieces of writing. This is also why many students find the multigenre research project more challenging (or "hard," as they would say). It takes more thought,

more involvement in the process.

As the teacher, my process also had to change, and it did, thanks to Tom Romano. Any teacher who wishes to use multigenre writing in the classroom should invest in Romano's *Blending Genre, Altering Style: Writing Multigenre Research Papers*. Romano guides the teacher through the multigenre paper, sharing the kinds of experiences and insights that one can only gain by living the process many times and perfecting it through trial and error. While providing ideas for format, mini-lessons, evaluation, and inspiration, Romano always encourages the teacher to find the right fit for his or her own students. I know that I am a much better guide for my students after having read and heeded Romano's advice and experience.

Like Romano, I use a workshop format during the multigenre process. This allows me to introduce different genres and concepts to the students during mini-lessons and work with students throughout the writing process. The workshop gives students time to experiment with the new concepts (what Romano calls making appointments for writing). Our four-by-four block schedule lends itself to this format, though it could be adjusted for any schedule. Students in my class not only turn in the entire paper at the end of the unit, but also hand in each genre piece for teacher editing after taking it through the writing process. I find this allows me to be more involved in the process and makes final grading easier during that end-of-the-marking-period crunch.

A Multigenre Sampling

My students have just finished up their final presentations of their papers for the semester as I write this. They chose subjects as varied as Edgar Allen Poe and Mother Teresa, the culture of the Middle East and the death penalty. The genres they wrote spanned from dramatic scenes to streams of consciousness to poems for two voices. As I read the pieces, I learned more than I have ever learned from traditional research papers, and I am thrilled by the diversity and growth in my students' writing. One of my students, Andrew, chose to write about the NBA's

bad boy, a player he is nearly obsessed with, Allen Iverson. The first piece he wrote during one of our writing appointments was a short scene dramatizing the moment Iverson was selected in the NBA draft. Upon reading it for the first time, I knew that he had chosen the right subject:

In a large building, a short pudgy man walks out onto a stage and towards a podium. He's made this walk many times. Perhaps more important than the walk is what the man says. Year after year, his words either bring you relief, make you cry, or leave you unclaimed. In an adjoining room, over the next three hours more than one hundred people will be relieved, will cry, or will be left with a feeling of great loneliness.

This is the first time the man has made his walk this year. He reaches the podium, and a twenty-year-old in the adjoining room hears his first word, "With." The young man becomes deaf; he can't hear. He closes his eyes and knows what words are coming next, " . . . the first pick in the 1996 NBA Draft, the Philadelphia 76ers select . . ." The words that follow are the ones that concern him the most.

In one moment everything changes. His family and friends grab him; he screams out inside, knowing everything he has overcome. His family and friends hear those words; they were

"Allen Iverson."

I have consistently seen this striking difference in the quality of student writing since their possibilities have been broadened with the multigenre approach.

In this piece, Andrew shows how much he knows about writing. He plays with the pacing, drawing out a moment from real time to the slow motion that Iverson must have felt. Though short,

it is very suspenseful. As readers, we want to know what words come out of the pudgy man's mouth. I suspect that in the traditional research paper this same information would be revealed quite simply: "After overcoming adversity, Allen Iverson was honored to be the first pick in the 1996 NBA draft." I have consistently seen this striking difference in the quality of student writing since their possibilities have been broadened with the multigenre approach.

Just as Andrew was forced to put himself in Allen Iverson's shoes in order to write his scene effectively, all of the students experimented with varying points of view and voices. Another student, Emily, began her multigenre process with aspirations of travelling around the world. She soon found this to be a daunting task, so she narrowed her topic to a shorter journey, and then settled upon the breathtaking story of the first exploration of the Amazon. In order to become Gonzalo Pizarro, one of the Conquistadors who led the expedition, she had to not only put herself in the role of a male Spaniard, but she also had to place herself in the sixteenth century. Each time I read one of Emily's pieces, I marveled at her ability to take on the voice of a man from another time and place:

My fellow Conquistadors, I am proud that you would stand before me and support my quest to uncover from the jungles east of this city a land abundant with cinnamon spice, unimaginable gold and riches, and, if God may look favorably upon us, the lost city of El Dorado!

[The audience emits a thunderous roar of cheering.]

It pleases me that you, the esteemed conquerors of the Inca Empire, proven soldiers that you are, as well as other daring combatants, will aid me in my venture.

[Cheers.]

We shall depart in a fortnight. I call upon you to assemble here on that day prepared to journey into the unknown forest. I plan to depart with no less than the 220 of you, each mounted on horseback; 4,000 Indians to

serve as guides, porters, and soldiers (have no fear; they will be shackled, so as to prevent their escape, until we are well into the wilderness); hundreds of hunting dogs; llamas to carry our supplies; and a herd of approximately 5,000 pigs for food. You shall be well equipped with arquebuses, cannons, crossbows, and so forth.

In addition to my command, your governor, Francisco de Orellana, will serve as lieutenant. At present he is in the city of Guyaquil; he shall meet us after we depart, bringing a small number of men and soldiers.

And so, my men, are you prepared to leave your familiar lives for a time to aid me in search of the glory this New World is here to offer us?

[cheers]

Then, in the name of our Lord, Jesus Christ, and our homeland, Spain, let us set forth in one fortnight to find what God may lead us to!

[The crowd erupts with continuous cheering]

I have always emphasized to my students the importance of a strong voice in writing. Emily is a talented writer whose voice would be strong in any piece that she put her soul into. However, this assignment stretches her abilities even more by asking her to experiment with voice in a way that regular research does not.

In order to produce these effective pieces, students must first overcome the obstacles that writers face when they are engrossed in a project. Liz decided to research the Underground Railroad and present her information in multiple genres that tell a story of two slaves, young and in love, who decide to escape to the North. During her first few days of research, Liz was getting very frustrated. When I asked about her struggle, she explained that she was having a hard time deciding what route her characters would take. "I know I want them to end up in Michigan, but I can't decide which way they should take to get there," she lamented as she

pointed out the different routes she had uncovered during her research. She had not yet even decided if her characters would make it, but her decision about this detail of their journey was clearly an important one. Amazingly, there is never any mention in her paper of the exact route on which the characters, Sarah and Michael, embarked. Much of the action in the story takes place as they make their preparations to leave. However, Liz's struggle reveals that the process of writing such a paper is as important as the final product.

I find on nearly a daily basis that in an age of MTV, computers, and Nintendo, I need to challenge students in ways different from those with which I was challenged in high school.

Students must consistently use these higher order thinking skills to decide not only what information to include, but also to decide which genre would best capture their research. Often students begin a piece in one genre but switch to another when they realize that the piece isn't quite meeting their expectations. They begin to see the nuances of their choices as we write and study genres and writer's craft. What happens if the point of view changes? When is a poem more effective than a dramatic scene? How do the genres all tie together and become one piece? All are sophisticated questions that are never even asked when writing traditional research papers, but that students must answer during the multigenre process.

Perhaps most important of all is the element of choice in the multigenre project that allows students to become more deeply involved with their subjects. I find on nearly a daily basis that in an age of MTV, computers, and Nintendo, I need to challenge students in ways different from those with which I was challenged in high school. Howard Gardner addressed this issue when he stated: "What we need in America is for students to get more deeply interested in things, more involved in them, more engaged in wanting to know; to have projects they can get excited about and work on over long periods of time; to be stimulated to find

things on their own" (qtd. in Romano, "A Time . . . " 1). I see the multigenre project as a vehicle for this kind of excited involvement, especially when I work with students like Jerrod. Jerrod has been an avid hockey player and lover of the sport since he was a small child. Having the opportunity to choose his love as a subject to write about in a creative format allowed him to produce a paper that exudes passion and longing. Sometimes it is difficult to see where this paper on the Stanley Cup ends and Jerrod begins, as evidenced by his closing piece:

freedom
 freedom is being all alone
 gliding on my frozen ocean
 my breath all that's seen
 besides my effortless soaring
 being alone in the world
 really isn't that bad
 not even life can get to me out here
 here I can be the hero
 here I can be all who have touched
 The Cup
 here
 I can do it all
 I can score the winning goal
 I can kiss
 The Cup
 please don't make me go inside
 I just want to stay here
 because I'm
 free

A Final Evaluation

I smile at my students' initial complaints about the project because I have learned much about the kind of writing they will produce and how their perceptions change as the project proceeds. As we finished up this round of multigenre papers in College English, I asked students what surprised them about the process. Their own words describe the value of the multigenre research paper far better than my own:

- *This whole paper surprised me. I didn't think I'd get into it is much as I did. The multigenre format allowed me to expand on my topic. I*

got to try different things.

- *I was surprised (overall when I was finally finished with this project) by all the different genres I learned and used in my genre project. There are so many different types of genres that I've never written a piece in before, and I was surprised how effectively they could get the information I wanted across.*
- *The biggest surprise during the process of writing this paper was how interesting it was. I never got bored during the whole process.*

And the answer to the first question they asked as we started it all:

- *Doing my paper in normal format I think would have been easier, but doing it the way I did it was more creative and interesting.*

While writing this very expository article, I recognize that there is still a place in the curriculum and the world for traditional research writing. However, as I read my students' words and continue to receive positive feedback from parents and staff alike, I know that my students and I will not go back to the regular research paper.

Works Cited

- Ondaatje, Michael. *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid*. New York: Vintage Books, 1970.
- Romano, Tom. *Blending Genre, Altering Style: Writing Multigenre Research Papers*. Portsmouth, NH: Boynton/Cook Publishers, 2000.
- _____. Paper. "A Time for Immersion, A Time for Reflection: The Multigenre Research Project and Portfolio Assessment." NCTE Spring Conference. Indianapolis, 1991.
- _____. *Writing With Passion: Life Stories, Multiple Genres*. Portsmouth, NH: Boynton/Cook Publishers, 1995.

Other helpful sources

- Avi. *Nothing but the Truth*. New York: Avon, 1991. This young adult novel is written in multigenre form. The reading is most appropriate for the middle grades, but is an excellent example of multigenre writing for high school students as

well.

Boose, Sara. "Will I 'Run Loose'?" *Voices from the Middle*. 6.3 (1999): 19-22.

In this article, a teacher relates the story of how she handled a challenge of the novel *Running Loose* by Chris Crutcher. It is all the more interesting and personal in its multigenre format and could be used as an example.

Bowen, Barbara. "A Multi-Genre Approach to the Art of the Biographer." *English Journal*. 80.4 (1991): 53-54.

Bowen explains her process with students as they write multigenre biographies. Her practical ideas and suggestions provide a good starting point for a research project using multiple genres.

Draper, Sharon. *Tears of a Tiger*. New York: Macmillan Publishing Company: 1994.

Draper uses multiple genres to weave the story of several friends who lost another longtime friend in a car accident. It focuses mainly on Andy, the driver of the car, who has difficulty moving beyond his own guilt and grief. The book reads at a middle school level, but is an excellent example of how to tell a story using the multigenre format.

Grierson, Sripa T. "Circling Through Text: Teaching Research Through Multigenre Writing." *English Journal*. 89.1 (1999): 51-55.

Grierson reveals her own attempts at multigenre writing with her class. Though clearly in favor of using the multigenre paper in place of traditional research papers, she is very frank about the troubles she has encountered, including her own students' struggle with the open-ended nature of the project.

Moulton, Margaret R. "The Multigenre Paper: Increasing Interest, Motivation, and Functionality in Research." *Journal of Adolescent and Adult Literacy*. 42.7 (1999): 528-539.

Moulton's honest article is a good read for those of us just getting started with the multigenre approach to research. Because of her own struggles with lack of examples of their papers that are available, her main purpose is to pro-

vide examples of her students' work. However, she also helps new multigenre teachers see how much will be learned in those beginning stages by both student and teacher.

Lain, Sheryl. "What's the Big Idea? Linking Creative Academic Writing in the Multigenre Research Paper." *Reflective Activities: Helping Students Connect with Text*. Ed. Louann Reid and Jeffrey N. Golub. Urbana, IL: National Council of Teachers of English, 1999. 66-73. Lain argues for the use of creative writing in English composition classes and discusses the use of the multigenre paper in connection with researching "big ideas." Especially interesting are her ideas for using visual media, reflection, and final presentations to the class.

About the Author

Jamie Hopkins, an MCTE and NCTE member, teaches language arts at Central Montcalm High School in Stanton, Michigan.