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Considering Alternatives: Multigenre Literature and Multigenre Writing

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Three years ago, my curriculum specialist handed me *Blending Genre, Altering Style: Writing Multigenre Papers* by Tom Romano. It was her intention that three or four of us create a book club and peruse the ideas as a possible alternative to the traditional research paper. At the time, I taught English at the alternative high school in my district, and I dreaded the research paper assignment required in both core courses: Freshman English and American Literature.

Until this point, I designed my writing course as a writer's workshop, borrowing from Fletcher and Portalupi's *Writing Workshop: The Essential Guide* and Atwell's *In the Middle: New Understandings About Writing, Reading, and Learning*. Every year my writing classes began amidst a flurry of high expectations. I wanted to impart as much as possible about the traits of good writing and still inspire voice, style and choice. I read Cope and Kalantzis' *Multiliteracies: Literacy Learning and the Design of Social Futures*, and recognized the need to incorporate multimodal experiences for my students as they created meaning in a fast paced society. Multimodal experiences would allow students to use visual representation, music, drama, and other means to communicate their ideas in a way that would not be possible with written expression. Hull and Nelson discuss giving students power by allowing them to engage in a variety of experiences in the classroom (225-227). In the educational arena of today's world, we do not often make time for such commitments. We are too busy pushing a five-paragraph essay model or prepping students to respond to the perfunctory on demand writing topics required by state assessments. As far as Romano's "blessed inevitability of growth and development" are concerned, we declare we don't have the time (Romano x).

Providing students multiple models from which to

draw inspiration is one key of writing instruction. Using authors whose writing students are familiar with is one way to incorporate the use of models, and teachers can use their work to show how writers craft their work and demonstrate different writing techniques (Atwell 149). Romano is a proponent of offering students multiple models and encouraging students to write in multiple genres (3-4). He believes that multigenre writing can redefine writing for teachers and students. His approach offers a rich combination of theory, practice and success with students from fifth grade through college and incorporates these basic principles: student centered environment, flexibility, and a love of learning. Too often, teachers feel they cannot relinquish entire class periods to writing, arguing there is not enough time. Writing often and for extended periods of time creates exposure for students; the more they write, the more likely they are to develop writing habits. Without time to think and create, students cannot create meaning about their worlds.

As I reflect on these ideas, I ask, "Isn't this what many of us want for our students?" To write and learn, to discover meanings, to celebrate life and learning through inquiry? What Romano provides is a mere beginning of what many writing teachers want for their students. The question becomes, how do we create an environment in which his ideas thrive?

The Need for a New Approach

After spending time with adolescents, no teacher can deny the innate struggle students experience throughout their teen years. This time is riddled with pressures, anxieties, questions, and exploration, all leading to the formation of a unique individual. In schools, we incorporate many support systems to help adolescents cope with their ever-changing lives, yet we don't always allow these to color our classroom strategy. The adolescent that is worried about her parent's divorce, what to wear to the game on Friday, or how to impress her friends is the same one that sits in our classroom, often disconnected and disengaged from canned writing prompts such as "What I Did over Summer Vacation" or "Principal for a Day".

Gilbert O'Brien began experimenting with multigenre writing because she wanted more for her

students. She believes the “complexities of the experiences and emotions of human beings warrant exploration within the complexities of various and diverse genres of writing” (Gilbert O’Brien 10). Telling stories is a deeply cultural trait. Adolescents often like to tell stories, but feel inhibited by “required” writing traits, commonly associated with exposition. Multigenre writing permits deep exploration of a topic and the creation of a narrative (a story). By combining the appeal of storytelling and the act of writing, teachers offer a chance for students to use various modes of expression to speak their vision.

After several years of refining her classroom practice, Atwell learned that “I liberated myself as an English teacher by liberating my students as writers” (Atwell 17). Students need choices, plain and simple. Multigenre writing offers that while increasing excitement about writing, motivation to write, and engagement in the actual task because students are ultimately in control of the content of their pieces, rather than being tied to a prescribed structure. As we encourage students to take control of their writing, we will also witness the shifts in their ability to analyze and conceptualize their thoughts.

I will return to these principles as I explore driving questions that can guide use as teachers: What is multigenre writing? Why should we incorporate multigenre writing into our classrooms? How does a multigenre classroom look and feel? Throughout this exploration, I intend to show how the benefits of multigenre writing will help educators strengthen their writing practices.

Multigenre Writing

Romano defines multigenre writing as “composed of many genres and subgenres, each piece self-contained, making a point of its own, yet connected by theme or topic and sometimes by language, images and content” (Romano x-xi). The voices of a multigenre paper lend to the understanding and experience of the reader. The author must contend with the creation of each piece and making sure all pieces fit together to create a single, learned work (Romano xi). Bruner’s idea of narrative thinking provides the basis for multigenre writing. He describes this mode as one that leads to good storytelling that deals with human actions and reactions. He also states narrative thinking

requires a theory, analysis, and an empirical discovery, much like Romano’s definition of multigenre writing (Bruner 13–16).

In the past, teachers focused on teaching students to think in response to chronological pieces of factual and logical information (Bruner 13). The bulk of our information was designed in this way and can still be useful in classrooms. However, Romano also believes there are other ways to think, such as in narrative, where authors depict their experiences through certain events (Romano x-xi). Furthermore, adolescents’ understanding of their experiences through their life’s events is the very basis of their lifeworld, one that we teachers should exploit and develop.

Introducing Multigenre to Students

As an example, I offer my method for introducing the idea of multigenre writing to my students. I select a person of interest and compile as many different pieces of writing about them that I can find. The first year I followed Romano’s lead and chose Count Basie. I presented students a biography and a poem about him. As students read the biography, they became familiar with many basic facts about Count Basie’s life. The facts that make up this biography are an example of the type of thinking we typically expect students to do. The poem, on the other hand, describes a moment of Count Basie’s performance—the rhythm, the heat, and the passion.

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Upon presenting this information to my students, I made a choice. By providing them with a selection of genres, students experienced other ways of knowing Count Basie, and therefore, understanding, connecting, analyzing and writing about him. Multigenre writing allows for this in-depth exploration of a subject matter beyond what is factual and informational, taking into consideration what is narrative

as well. When we teach writing, we must teach our students that it should unfold outside explicit knowledge, in a realm where they control the meaning and interpretation. By doing so, educators open the door of possibility by encouraging students to think about their writing, to take chances and to explore. As evidenced here, multigenre writing allows for this experience in ways traditional forms cannot.

A Point of Contention

Critiques of multigenre writing contend that it is not as rigorous as exposition, or academic writing. Critics believe multigenre writing contributes to an inability to perform on standardized tests and inadequate preparation for college writing. However, if we consider any university department, then we know that the manner of documentation for writing in any discipline varies, often even within a department. One professor may prefer one method of writing or documentation over another used in the same department. Furthermore, Mack contends designating one format is misleading and leads to mere summary of textual sources rather than critical and creative interpretation (92). Essentially, when we drive students to perform within one structure, we set them (and ourselves) up for failure because the structure, void of creativity, simply encourages regurgitation of facts (and sometimes plagiarism).

With multigenre writing, we open the door on format and structure while encouraging essential qualities of writing instruction such as synthesis, attention to audience, incorporation of multiple intelligences and task engagement (O'Brien vi). By paying attention to such qualities, we encourage students to consider coherence and unity in their writing. They must figure out how the paper will "hang together" (Romano xi). This process becomes almost as critical as the writing itself because the burden is on the student to create a unified piece out of multiple pieces of writing (Mack 92).

The thought required for this process is significantly more involved than creating a report synthesizing source information. Multigenre writing asks students to use their ideas to experiment with form, rather than simply present it. Elbow states, "everyone learned to use language...the skill with language is invariably there. Writing courses need to *use* it and transform it for new ends—not work against it" (115).

Multigenre writing plays on the tension between cognition and emotion effectively, so that students use new language to create pieces representative of the combination of their thoughts and perceptions about a topic, and such synthesis of ideas is a critical thinking skill few would argue against. In addition to examining multigenre writing, we must acknowledge that the concept of multigenre already existed.

Multigenre Literature

As early as 1968, authors wrote stories using multiple narrators. *The Pigman* by Paul Zindel tells the story of two high school sophomores, Lorraine and John, in alternating chapters. On the surface, these two adolescents attempt to navigate life, and through their telling, the reader learns of their unlikely friendship with Mr. Pignati and their experiences with him leading up to his untimely death. Through their narratives we gain insight into these troubled, outcast teens and their inability to transition from childhood to adulthood. Through their narratives, we see the changes in the relationship between the two characters as well as its impact on the story they tell. Gillis explains that when more than one character is allowed to tell a story, as readers, we are aware of how each character responds to the events of the story, rather than focusing on one telling (52).

There are several other examples of novels that utilize various types of narrators, thus changing the expectation and experience of the reader. Some novels use multiple "over-the-shoulder" narrators to tell their stories. One such example is Robert Cormier's *I am the Cheese*. In this novel, Cormier describes Adam Farmer's search for his father through a first person account and a transcript of Adam's conversations with a "mystery man" (complete with notes). Gillis notes "at the end we are able to connect the seemingly separate stories, voices, and time periods, but along the way, we, like Adam, struggle to sort out fact from appearance" (54). Likewise, multigenre novels may contain numerous voices.

The multigenre novel takes the idea of multiple narrators one step further by incorporating not just other perspectives but also other modes of viewing the story's events. In a multigenre novel, a reader can "hear the voices surrounding a place, an event, and the people involved—voices embedded in genres that naturally belong to those

settings, people and events” (Gillis 54). By offering information in a variety of genres, these novels portray stories with a higher level of authenticity. Avi’s *Nothing But the Truth* is one such novel. In it, Phillip Malloy decides to antagonize his English teacher, Margaret Narwin, by humming and singing during the playing of the national anthem all because he received a (deserved) failing grade on his exam, which prevented him from trying out for the tack team. The story is told through memo, dialogue, personal letter, diary, and news articles, allowing various narrators an opportunity to present their involvement in Phillip’s conflict and the ensuing misunderstanding presented by his removal from the classroom as an act of anti-patriotism. Through the genres, the reader learns of “emerging stories of a teacher’s disillusionment, parental pressure and hypocrisy, unprincipled administrators, and students who genuinely care about teachers and learning,” all issues relevant and interesting to today’s teen (Gillis 55).

Why are multigenre narrators and multigenre novels important considerations as we consider the meaning of multigenre writing? Simply, the stories they offer require more from their readers—more attention to task, more analysis of perspective and style, more attention overall. Gillis shows in a multigenre novel, the use of multiple voices ensure readers must take on a new position, one of authority and detective, in order to understand the piece (56). Taken apart, what Gillis describes as necessary strategies for experiencing a multigenre novel, are also essential strategies in the writing classroom.

Writing teachers want students to review information and construct meaning *as they write*. Writing teachers want students to allow the creation to take center stage, guiding the writing. Writing teachers ask students to consider various sources, ideas, reactions, and connections when creating their pieces. The goals of multigenre are the same, whether the focus is reading, writing, or both. In addition to this focus on higher order thinking skills, multigenre literature and writing also play a role in the changing landscape of today’s digital society.

How Technology Enhances Multigenre Literature and Writing

Technology is fast changing the landscape of classrooms.

Hypermedia, a form of multimedia, is changing the way we define text. Wilhelm defines hypermedia as multiple ways to negotiate text through a computer (4). The navigation process involves operating under various sign systems, such as sound, video, graphics, animations, etc. The reader accesses these through use of the buttons that make up the navigation system of the text. Wilhelm believes it offers a different kind of writing space “more powerful, available, and useful than the printed page” (6). Navigation of this new writing space, then, creates a new form of literacy as well; one that takes advantage of the cultural tools currently available is exactly what literacy has done through the ages.

As students encounter hypermedia, what constitutes reading and writing practices in the classroom evolves as well. Similar to printed text, hypermedia encourages the reader to take an active role in making meaning, a key component of literacy instruction. Swenson et al argue that hypermedia expands this role by allowing the reading to intervene in the process (355). Readers navigate multimodal content in collaboration with the author, thus co-creating, or rewriting, the text.

In order to navigate the new forms of text, readers must revamp their use of meaning making strategy. Students must learn to adequately “transact with multimodal texts...and make meaning within these variant modes of representation” (Swenson et al. 356). This broadens what educators formerly taught as reading strategies. Within hypermedia, students must learn how to interact with various forms, which concomitantly requires a more sophisticated level of cognitive skill. In addition, students must be prepared to identify complex forms of textual bias, analyze the quality of information, and the expertise of the author in new ways, particularly as what they view on screen changes according to the path they choose to take.

Likewise, writers must revamp their strategies as well. Glasgow notes that while student learn new ways to navigate text, they also learn new ways to create text (45). Reading in multigenre encourages students to write in multigenre as a way of reconciling their voice, perspective and life experiences to the text. Furthermore, information can be accessed today in ways never dreamed possible. As a result, the boundaries of writing are being pushed

to include new forms. Hypermedia forms of writing, such as blogging or message boards, provide challenging and necessary forms of discourse among students. Luke argues that these forms of writing, like traditional exposition, require students to engage in critical thinking, intertextual connections, and thinking laterally across text (71-73). Likewise, the arrangement of information in these forms into multigenre pieces of writing encourages synthesis and consideration for audience, both qualities of good writing instruction. Technology and multigenre writing enables access to the cultural conversations inherent in the world they live in (Myers and Beach 258-259).

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