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The Ins, Outs, and In-Betweens of Multigenre Writing

NANCY MACK

Like many teachers I have been working my way toward multigenre projects by adding visuals and creative formats to my writing assignments. I have been greatly assisted in my progress over the years by Tom Romano's books about teaching writing—*Clearing the Way*; *Writing with Passion*; and *Blending Genre, Altering Style*—which in themselves represent one teacher's professional development. After recently collecting a batch of stellar multigenre projects, 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. Several of my colleagues generously took the time after the meeting to look through the projects and celebrate their excellence. Sharing my students' writing is a wonderful way to let my work as an educator speak for my methodology, but I owe myself and my colleagues a more thoughtful analysis of the academic virtues of multigenre projects.

My strongest motivation for studying multigenre writing is the compelling responses of my students who have authored writing projects that have awed me with their power and elegance. I am moved to think of my students' writing as more than reports or papers. They are works of art, not simply because of their visual or poetic inclusions, but because of their aesthetic meaningfulness. For support of my point about aesthetics, I turn to the work of Mikhail Bakhtin, a Russian literary critic, whose scholarship masterfully presents a similar case for accepting the dialogic language of the novel as art. Yet as I do so, I fully realize that some would not accept the mixed quality of these multigenre projects as academic writing. Perhaps the most persuasive argument that I can marshal to convince others of the usefulness of the multigenre assignment is that this type of writing requires much more in the way

of academic skills than the minimal requisites of the traditional monogenre research paper. Combining these two perspectives, to foster writing as both an art and a skill, demonstrates how multigenre writing can be utilized to teach critical analysis, documentation of sources, and aesthetic unity.

Before examining multigenre writing in more depth, I need to respond to the myth of the traditional college research paper format. The most authoritative voice that I can invoke on this matter is that of composition scholar and journal editor, Richard Larson. In his article, "The 'Research Paper' in the Writing Course: A Non-Form of Writing," he explains that universities house a plethora of conflicting disciplines, all of which have competing notions of what academic research requires. I would add to Larson's critique that in any one area of study such as polymer engineering, market research, or geriatric sociology, what qualifies as research itself has probably changed significantly in the last twenty-five years and will continue to change, perhaps even more rapidly in the future. Understandably, high school teachers and general education professors harbor the unrealistic desire that one report format could be decided upon that would satisfy all of the disciplines and all of the courses at the university. If

we had such an all-purpose, standardized format, writing would be far easier to teach and produce. The research report might even become a template or an icon on a word processing program that a student could simply click to set the format before beginning to write. Regretably, asking academics in any discipline to agree on something as limited as one brand of documentation style—MLA, APA, CSE, Chicago, etc.—could result in a duel to the death. Even within the discipline of English studies, linguists, literary critics, ethnographic researchers, English as a second language scholars, and professional writers all need diverse systems to cite their particular sources of information. In much the same way as the research paper myth, standards and proficiency initiatives push for the minimum in competencies and skills. Naming one written format as universal is not only fallacious but functions in practice to misrepresent academic research itself as little more than summarizing multiple textual sources on the same topic without any critical or creative interpretation. Having been both a secondary teacher and a university professor, I can say that asking students to imitate a dumbed-down, artificial research paper format most often results in boring, plagiarized papers. These drawbacks are part of the reason why I created a multigenre research assignment that I believe provides a more academically challenging learning experience for my students. Likewise, I have learned a great deal about teaching writing from this experience. Although the incidents and examples cited here are about college students, the lessons about how students and teachers learn from one another are more universal.

My Classroom Context

In a new course about writing workshop pedagogy, I planned for Integrated Language Arts majors to experience multigenre research writing in the middle part of a ten-week course. Our textbooks were Atwell's *In the Middle*, Romano's *Writing with Passion*, and Weaver's *Teaching Grammar in Context*. For the first two and a half weeks of the course, students wrote and published a portfolio of poetry, and during the last three weeks we focused on the teaching of grammar through writing projects. Students also kept reading journals and were e-pals with high school students. When I first introduced the idea of multigenre writing, none of the students had ever heard of such an assignment before, and

some even complained that they were reluctant to participate in a less than traditional assignment. The topic of folklore was presented, using some of the introductory ideas from Simmons's *Student Worlds*, *Student Words*, and students completed several brainstorming sheets about family stories, folk group identities, and community history. Students were given an overview of the project that required both primary research from first person interviews and secondary research from books, newspapers, and Web sources. After initial exploratory interviews with informants, most students found a central story that they wanted to tell about a relative, group, or town. Students chose the following topics:

- family love stories
- a relative's experiences with racism
- the death of a great-uncle in WWII
- a remembrance of a mother's life
- three generations of mechanics
- a scout troop's bad weather camping trip
- the founder of a local church
- a difficult genealogy search
- two generations of teenage rebellion
- the role of dance in a couple's relationship
- a great-grandmother's strength through faith
- a family's pattern of affection and indifference
- a high school drama club
- a town's reactions to a prison riot
- a family farm's history
- a losing high school football team

At first I asked for the projects to include three genres but quickly expanded this requirement to five genres when I realized how much effort students wanted to invest in this project. I did mini-lessons on

- interviewing and note taking
- examining other students' multigenre projects
- sharing possible genres and unusual publishing formats
- finding historical and analytical sources
- selecting a theme and focusing on one event
- incorporating contextual details and multiple perspectives

- writing in another person's voice
- writing about a photograph
- troubleshooting problems
- documenting primary and secondary sources
- drafting a letter of introduction to the reader
- creating a bibliography and footnotes

Critical Analysis

I stressed early in the term that the academic discipline of folklore presumes that all cultures are worthy of study, analysis, and respect. I stressed critical analysis through two types of minilessons, researching historical contexts and including multiple perspectives of the same event, encouraging students to find places in their writing to add rich, contextual details about economics, politics, and cultural norms. In class discussions we considered how the mind-set of the time period made it difficult for individuals to escape the pressures of predefined roles or cultural stereotypes. Jeff empathetically analyzed his mother's problems as a young wife in the late sixties and early seventies:

My mother had grown up being a submissive woman, taught by a now-antiquated American logic—and my grandmother—to suppress her voice in favor of a man's. . . . The need of my mother for a strong husband and the need of my father for an obedient wife met like the pieces of a jigsaw puzzle. The pair, one might say, just fell into place.

Jeff used a historic discussion of the gender roles to foreground his memoir about his mother's sacrifices:

When times were especially hard, and my father was at his worst, our mother had to walk from our house to a nearby strip mall in order to sell her class ring. It was precious to her, identical to her two best friends' rings, but she was willing to sacrifice anything for her children.

Those images of my mother—her weakness and her strength, her humiliation in marriage and her pride in calling us her children—have flooded my senses with emotion in the days since she has been gone. Standing in the hallway outside my parent's bedroom or driving past the jewelry store that bought my mother's ring years ago grounds me, humbles me with identity. I am reminded of the turmoil my mother survived, the struggle that has bound us—my sister, my mother, and I—closer than any other family I know. I am

reminded that I am a son, that I will one day be a father, that I am hers.

Jeff powerfully rewrote his mother's published obituary to include information that was not mentioned in the original newspaper article; both obituaries, the actual and the revised one, were placed side by side to emphasize the revision. Jeff's added details demonstrated many types of analysis: historic, gendered, economic, personal, and ironic. Students made a concerted effort to demonstrate in their writing that they understood the time period and the social forces that framed the stories that they wished to understand and honor.

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I introduced another type of critical analysis with a minilesson that had students experiment with differences in perspective. After a few minutes brainstorming details about a particular person's habits and values, students enjoyed writing in the voice of a character from their folklore story. Most of the projects included multiple first person perspectives. I was impressed with how writing from multiple perspectives precipitated more complexity and conflict in students' representations of a selected event. A few students even made the resolution of ideological conflicts the focus of one of their final pieces. Rachel's family folklore project dramatized an act of discrimination against a relative. To represent conflicting beliefs about racism, Rachel wrote from six different perspectives and utilized the genres of a diary entry, a morning conversation, a one act play, a stream of consciousness monologue, an excerpt from an interview, and a

eulogy from another character's perspective explaining how the main character's beliefs about race had changed over time to include family members from different races:

But Dad wasn't perfect. He had his faults like everyone else. He once told all of his kids that we shouldn't date "outside our kind." But I don't think Dad was truly prejudiced. I believe his intolerance was the result of a negative experience in his youth. He was targeted because of his "background" and I believe he wanted his kids to be safe by staying close to family and our culture. . . . We saw a change in Dad, he kind of softened a bit as he got older. Race and color didn't matter to him anymore. . . . He showed us all that it is possible to change our attitudes, and I hope we all will remember his life and learn a lesson from it.

As a writer, Rachel's task was quite difficult. Originally, she focused only on a lunch counter incident in which the central character suffers racial bigotry, but she later decided to make the problem of racism more complicated by alluding to this character's own biases about race. Critically reflecting upon her ethical obligations to her family members and readers, Rachel chose to add the eulogy to clarify that time and family events had changed the main character's racial biases. Since a multigenre project can include fiction and nonfiction, authors must decide when it is ethical to fictionalize events in order to add another perspective.

As students generated multiple pieces for their projects, conflicts arose among differing perspectives of the same event that would not have occurred had I assigned a more traditional, monogenre format. Multigenre writing has the potential to make use of the dialogic quality of language. In his scholarly writing, Bakhtin often appropriates words and phrases in unusual ways to represent his unique concepts. A first impression of his use of "dialogic" might be that this term literally describes a dialogue that occurs among characters; however, Bakhtin extends this concept to include a social dialogue that exists implicitly within a single word. Accordingly, Bakhtin explains how language carries historic meanings that can potentially provoke dialogues across generations in which the author feels obligated to speak an "answer-word" to future generations:

The word in living conversation is directly, blatantly, oriented toward a future answer-word: it provokes an answer, anticipates it and structures itself in the answer's direction. Forming itself in an

atmosphere of the already spoken, the word is at the same time determined by that which has not yet been said but which is needed and in fact anticipated by the answering word. (*Dialogic Imagination* 280)

Writing about the past put students in the ethical position of interpreting the past for future generations. Rachel and other students authored multigenre projects that revealed a responsive dialogue among their different pieces of writing and across generations through a sophisticated use of multiple types of language. Bakhtin describes this hybrid quality of language as "heteroglossia," a useful tool for the writer since within any language there is a social stratification of diverse classes, generations, professions, epochs, politics, etc. I had not expected that the contextual and dialogic qualities of multigenre writing would elicit such intricate texts from my students. Their folklore research projects were so much more than a bunch of family stories or town legends. When I share copies of the projects of my former students with the new students next term, I will emphasize how the historic details and the multiple perspectives added layers of analysis to the representation of a single event.

Documentation

The contextual and dialogic quality of these multigenre projects commanded an equally complex process for referencing primary and secondary sources, fact and fiction, and authorial intent, which provoked students to reconsider their responsibilities as writers. I began the process by stressing that the oral interviews were serious data that must be documented just like books or Web sites. Students took notes or transcribed tapes for all of their interviews and cataloged each one in their bibliographies. Of the three or more interviews, two were to be with the same person on different dates in order to generate reflective, follow-up questions. I provided an interview release form for students to make informants aware of their rights and cautioned students to retell the stories of others respectfully. I checked interview notes and secondary research notes daily to be sure that students were not putting these tasks off until the last minute.

At first students had difficulty coming up with secondary sources. We discussed various types of contextual historical information that could be researched. Excitement erupted when Holly found a

1944 *Saga* magazine article to use as a model for her WWII story, and Kimberly found a database with information about Big Bands and the jargon associated with swing dancing. Analytical information was harder for students to locate. After a few suggestions, they eventually found articles by experts in related fields such as counseling, communications, management, sociology, and psychology. One student thought that it would be clever to involve Freud as a guest in a fictitious talk show. Originally, I feared that this student had no knowledge about

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Freud, but the student's writing evidenced a familiarity with the concepts of *ego* and *id* from readings for a psychology course. Suddenly their readings in other courses became relevant to their work in English class. Certainly these projects could have been completed without historical and analytical sources; hence, I called attention to the practices of fiction writers who spend a great deal of time in libraries researching information that makes their historical or murder mystery novels more realistic.

Due to the modernization of documentation systems such as MLA's internal citations, the use of footnotes has become somewhat *passé*. Footnotes are still utilized for content information, although some professional journals discourage authors from using them, and, if used, they are placed at the end of the article or chapter. I can remember the days before computers when students were taught the complicated process of placing footnotes at the bottom of the page on which the information was cited. Since most college and high school courses are no longer demanding them, I contemplated that requiring footnotes might be a nice opportunity to impress my colleagues by increasing the ante on academic skills. Actually, my insistence on footnotes for this paper was less a matter of feigning the appearance of rigorous standards and more a matter of necessity. The need for diverse genres prompted students to produce pieces that were imitations of newspapers, letters,

textbooks, magazines, marriage certificates, etc. Some included copies of real documents, since I certainly didn't want students to incorporate rare family artifacts into their projects. Without footnotes it became almost impossible for me to tell which documents were copies and which ones were fakes. This ethical dilemma came up spontaneously in class just days before the projects were due. Footnotes were inserted in order to document which parts of the information given were factual and how primary and secondary sources were used. For example, Kimberly did her project about six generations of family love stories. The first story was the oldest and the one about which Kimberly had the least primary information. She knew that her relative was a millwright in northern Ohio in the late 1800s, and his wife was the former cook for the lumber camp, so she generated two fictitious pages of an Ohio history textbook. In addition to her excellent computer skills, Kimberly tore the edges of the pages to make them look like they were literally ripped out of a textbook and then mounted them in a large scrapbook along with her other pieces. Her footnote explains:

The facts surrounding Cal and Emma were used as much as possible for the piece. Little is known about their first encounters as they died in the late 1940s, with their daughter Lavada being the only child left to tell the story; however, the historical context for the time frame when they met is easily researched on the Web. Ironically enough, this abundance of information gave me the idea to do a textbook style story with my grandparents' story in an interview page of this text. The facts from Cal and Emma's life are paraphrased from Lavada's interview (Lavada 2, 8-9); the facts embedded in the textbook are paraphrased from various lumber camp Web sites (Huronian, LUMBER, Museum of Logging); the introduction is quoted from the era's widespread legend of Paul Bunyan (Folklore Class, Paul Bunyan).

In some cases, the students wanted to fool the reader but only temporarily, for effect. Footnotes were needed to provide spaces where students could explain their ethical intentions for composing a particular type of document. Many students created pieces with dual perspectives when they wrote letters, diary entries, eulogies, obituaries, and commendations in another character's voice. Bakhtin analyzes the writer's ability to create prose that is double-voiced: "It serves two speakers at the same time and expresses simultaneously two different intentions: The direct intention of the character who is

speaking, and the refracted intention of the author" (*Dialogic Imagination* 324). Bakhtin writes extensively about several types of double-voiced discourse as an internal dialogue between various perspectives.

As I reread the footnotes written by my students for this article, I noticed that many used them to provide additional commentary about their pieces, with some even dialoging more directly with the piece. Rachel, whose project about racial discrimination was considered earlier, included a copy of the poem "Taking It Back" by Dixie Salazar prior to her own pieces of writing. Rachel employed footnotes so she could converse with specific lines in this poem. In direct response to the opening lines of the poem

Like Fugitives, or outlaws
on the lam, we moved away,
changed the spelling
of our last name,

Rachel's footnote stated:

My family never changed the spelling of our last names like Dixie Salazar's family does in the poem "Taking It Back"; however the pronunciation of the Spanish names became "Anglicized." My mother's maiden name is Tellez. (The correct pronunciation is Tey-ez, but they pronounce it Tell-ez. My father's last name is Lerma, which has a trickier pronunciation; the letter r should be softly rolled, but it isn't.) While this may not seem like a big deal to some people, I believe it is important because a name is the biggest identifier of who you are. I can relate to this poem because our family names were "assimilated" to become more acceptable to the rest of society. (Which in our case was Northwestern Ohio.)

Frankly, I had not suggested the use of footnotes for commentary about a published author's writing, but Rachel impressed me with the many ways that she found to incorporate her research about racial identity into her project. In the future, I intend to give more guidance to students about what type of information to include in footnotes, but generally I was pleased with the constructive ways in which they used footnotes not only to document their use of research, but to explain how they had authored an ethical dialogue between fact and fiction.

Coherence and Aesthetic Unity

Years of teaching had prepared me to anticipate certain problems with this type of assignment, but I had not adequately thought through how difficult it

would be for students to hold together several different pieces of writing on the same topic. A few students ended up with a hodgepodge of interchangeable parts that had no particular order and did not lead progressively from beginning to end. Other students solved their problems with coherence in interesting ways. Shauna, who did her report on three generations of mechanics in her family, articulated how she solved this problem in a class discussion, which happened too late for others to rework their projects. Shauna became a character in her own project by devising a larger story about helping a relative move, which established the conflict of whether to throw out a box of old family papers. The gambit of unpacking the box became a framework for several chapters about the family members that recounted Shauna's growing awareness of the pride that these men had in their knowledge about cars and planes. From this class of students, I have learned how various types of transitional devices such as chronology, narrative frame, thematic quotations, repetition of characters, and timelines can assist the multigenre writer, and I will certainly integrate these strategies into future minilessons.

Introductory and concluding documents did help to improve the projects' coherence and unity. I suggested introductory letters to the class after we read an example multigenre project from *Blending Genres*. The most effective letters were productive places for students to reflect upon how they selected their topic and what insights were gained from the research process. Since some of the genres were hard to identify at first, I will in the future assign a table of contents, listing titles of each selection and identifying the genre and page number. I will also emphasize the usefulness of a concluding piece that turns the reader's attention to the future or puts the whole experience into perspective through analysis or resolution/irresolution of conflicting perspectives.

Coherence and unity are highly valued traits of published texts. I am reminded of how many works of fiction require the reader to make sense from multiple genres and perspectives such as *Canterbury Tales*, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, *Crime and Punishment*, *Ulysses*, *The Great Gatsby*, *The Martian Chronicles*, *Nothing but the Truth*, *Tears of a Tiger*, etc. Similarly, my limited experience viewing Web pages has made me more critical of how Web designers combine competing information and hyperlinks to promote or in some cases deceive the viewer. Understandably, the tension that holds di-

A Multigenre Paper

- requires that diverse types of writing be generated for a theme
- permits meaning to dictate form instead of vice versa
- presents multiple, conflicting perspectives of one event or topic
- stimulates critical analysis and higher level thinking skills
- provides a rich context for an event or topic
- integrates factual information into a meaningful text versus copying or simple recall
- can incorporate interviews, oral history, folklore, and ethnographic research
- demonstrates a sophisticated knowledge of various types and uses of language
- creates coherence among the parts of a problem to be solved
- requires a bibliography, footnotes, and careful documentation of sources
- is almost impossible to plagiarize
- permits the author to highlight personal interests and special expertise
- can make full use of computers and multimedia
- imitates the format of modern novels and innovative business reports
- results in an aesthetically attractive product
- demands careful reading and response

verse elements together is a far more demanding skill than requiring that students prepare an outline of major and minor supports for a topic that they have researched. Multigenre projects place the burden on the student to author a coherent, unified whole out of dissimilar pieces of writing.

In the most interesting examples of published writing, coherence and unity are not determined by the dictates of the format but by the significance of the content. Thus, coherence has more to do with meaningfulness than mechanical requirements. Ironically, the teacher can construct an assignment in such a way as to cause students to have coher-

ence problems. Indeed, it may be harder to make a piece of writing coherent that has several isolated requirements—whether these requirements are mono- or multigenre in nature—but what ultimately motivates the writer to struggle to create a meaningful whole is the personal significance of the text.

Bakhtin discusses problems with unity in the first line of one of his earliest works: “A whole is called ‘mechanical’ when its constituent elements are united only in space and time by some external connection and are not imbued with the internal unity of meaning” (*Art and Answerability* 1). Bakhtin’s philosophical view of aesthetic unity takes meaning into account. He explains that a dynamic, organic unity between art and life is an intentional construction by the author, an “architectonic”; however, this unity becomes meaningful only when art and life become answerable to one another. “Answerability” is an aesthetic responsibility for which Bakhtin believes that the author must take the blame for creating an organic unity between art and life.

My interpretation of Bakhtin’s point is that, 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. By making their writing answerable for their life experiences, these students created art: Jeff honored his mother’s strength, Rachel dramatized the complexity of racism, Kimberly celebrated love stories, Shauna lauded the labor of men from her family, and there were several other students whose projects were aesthetically meaningful. For the few days that I had them, I shared these projects with my friends and colleagues, who were moved by the students’ powerful uses of language. Many students told me that they proudly shared their writing with family and friends. Art that is answerable seeks to continue its dialogue with others.

Far too many writing assignments answer only the need to generate a grade or check off an accomplished skill. Of course, the multigenre project has all the potential to become the traditional research paper of the future. Not all of my students’ projects were of an amazingly high caliber; a few were perfunctory efforts done only to pass the course. The pitfall comes from focusing on form rather than content, not from the merit of a particular format. Answerability may sound like a nebulous goal for students’ writing assignments, but I worry that when we leave meaning out of the picture and teach form as a universal construct, we make

writing into a mechanical, mindless task. For me, multigenre assignments have instructional validity only when they produce meaningful texts.

Since no assignment or format will unilaterally guarantee meaningful writing, the teacher can only hope to create assignments that make it more likely that students will risk inserting meaningfulness into their writing. From my teaching experiences, I know that assignments must be innovative and interesting enough so that they appear unlike the old drudgery of hackneyed assignments. The format must be open and attractive to invite the possibility of doing something engaging rather than merely pursuing the trivial school game. Topics for writing should make use of the unique knowledge and skills that students already have, connecting school work in a respectful way to things that they value in their personal lives. The completed assignment should be personally significant and full of power and integrity for the author so that the writing itself demands to be heard by a real audience.

Perhaps it is easier to study what goes wrong with teaching than to study why a particular strategy or assignment works well. Classroom mistakes demand that we pay attention and, if at all possible, repair our mistakes by the next class period, whereas successes do not force us to consider what can be learned when students write well and enjoy themselves in the process. Teachers are criticized for being more interested in what works than in matters of theory and analysis. Maybe what works in the classroom is an enactment of personal theorizing that must be articulated and examined in more depth for continued professional development. The question that will lead us forward to better theories and practices is, Why does this work?

After three decades as a teacher, I have decided to assign only writing projects that I can't wait

to read. Life is too short and too messy to teach phony formulas, and students are too wonderful and insightful to be trivialized by pointless assignments. Writing should be full of meaning and joyous to share. Likewise, the assignments that I author for my students are my own moment of personal integrity, my answerability for my career as a teacher of writing. 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.

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ACEI International Conference

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