

THE COLOR SLIDES OF WRITING: MULTIGENRE RESEARCH IN ACTION

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Abstract

Multigenre research, an alternative method for students to express their knowledge about a topic, consists of multiple compositions in such genres as poetry, monologues, stories, flash fiction, wills, obituaries, and artwork. Unlike the traditional research paper, which is usually a single piece of expository writing, the Multigenre research paper consists of numerous expression in varying genres, connected by a theme, a unifying thread, or general idea that emerges from the research. Each piece that makes up the research report can stand alone, but taken together, they construct a vision of the research from various perspectives and voices. Thus, the student creates a holistic experience for the reader in an artistic collage that blends facts garnered from their research with various kinds of literary texts.

Dr. Tom Romano (2000) uses the metaphor of a color slide to define Multigenre research. He explains, "Each genre is a color slide in itself, possessing its own satisfying composition, but also working in concert with others to create a single literacy experience."(p. 4). Further, Putz (2006) clarifies:

In the Multigenre research project, the student selects a topic and does research as if it were a traditional research paper: collecting information and recording it, synthesizing the information, then presenting it through writing. Instead of the single extended prose piece of a traditional research paper. . .the Multigenre paper consists of a number of creative pieces--poetry, advice columns, diary entries, news articles, lists, artwork, graphics, and alternate styles of writing--imaginative writing based on fact . (p.2)

With my students, I use this working definition to teach Multigenre research with one caveat: Although Multigenre is composed of many genres, it is not a seamless anthology of the students' creative writing pieces. Each genre stands on its own merit but also works to create a unified text of writing. The compositions are connected by a theme, a thread, or general idea that emerges from the research. For example, Melissa, one of my students and an avid fan of J.R.R. Tolkien, found that "hope" became the theme which she discovered from reading Tolkien's books and researching his life. Hope was the thread she used to connect and integrate the various pieces of her research on Tolkien. Putz (2006) explains, "It is this emergent theme that often suggests a thread with which the writer may create cohesion among the separate pieces of writing." (p.2) Romano (2000) and Putz (2006) offer middle and high school teachers excellent guides on how to help

students connect their various pieces of writing and to accomplish a Multigenre research project.

My experience has been that Multigenre research empowers the student with the tools to experiment with language, experiment with various literary texts--print and non-print. It promotes courage to take risks with their writing, and to make meaning from the topics they are researching. In turn, the experience expands their limited view of the world and often provides avenues of self-discovery never thought of before. Multigenre research is a golden opportunity for self-discovery, a way of seeing, a way for writers to develop their individual voice, and an avenue for developing and honing critical thinking skills.

Middle school students are ripe for Multigenre research. Their innate curiosity of the world compels them to explore topics that appeal to them on a personal level. Explorers at heart, middle school students uncover amazing facts that enlighten and entertain the reader through Multigenre research. Exploration and research require time and effort to create the space needed within the Language Arts curriculum. If given an opportunity, students can explore their worlds with passion and energy and express their knowledge through various genres that will astound the casual observer. In her book, *Vision and Voice: Extending the Literacy Spectrum* (1999) Linda Reif, envisions the time and space needed to help our young charges learn and grow through various methods of teaching that make sense to students. Her pedagogy about student learning expresses and

compliments the framework of Multigenre writing.

Vision and Voice is about reading and writing but it is mainly about slowing down. It is about letting students observe and view, interpret, and represent their worlds with more than words. It is about inviting, encouraging, and teaching our students to use visual images, voices, and words to show us how they see the extraordinary in the ordinary, and how they make sense of their worlds through all the ways that make sense to them (p. xx).

I would add that students' Multigenre writing is an exploration to "see" the extraordinary in the ordinary as one of my students envisioned in her research project. Katie, a vivacious, articulate young woman, wrote an "I Am" poem from her research into the Columbine High School shooting in Colorado in 1999. At the time of the shooting, Katie was an elementary school student. She chose the topic to research because she wanted to try and make sense of this senseless act. Romano (2004) states, "Writing begets seeing, seeing begets writing . . . when writers put words on paper, they make connections" (pp.34-36). The connection for Katie became the school. She writes,

I AM

I am a school forever changed.
I wonder why my rooms are the site of
thirteen murders,
I hear raging bullets ringing in the halls,
I see two flapping, black trench coats;
destruction in their wake.
I want to erase this from my memory,
I am a school forever changed.

I feel the cold trickle of blood pooled on
my floors.
I touch the hearts of the nation with the
tragic story,
I worry . . . maybe . . . this will happen
again,
I cry when I think of that terrible day,
I am a school forever changed.

I understand the event is fueled by hate,
I say, let violence be a thing of the past.
I dream of screaming students crying for
help--All in vain.
I hope--in the future--I will be a safe
place for students,

I am a school forever changed.

Katie

Katie's exploration into the Columbine High School shooting expanded her thinking and vision about the school building where the murders took place. Once she began writing the scene, she told me that even though she felt this was a horrible human tragedy, she wanted to write a poem from the perspective of the school expressing its grief. The underlying thought for Katie is that schools should be a safe haven for students, not places of violence and murder.

Not only does Multigenre writing compel adolescents to explore various perspectives in their writing but it also strengthens the writer's voice. Romano (2004) explains voice as at a writer's very core. He states, "Voice is the writer's presence on the page, the writer's DNA" (p.5). Some teachers view voice as a difficult concept for middle school students to grasp. I argue that voice can be developed and

strengthened through Multigenre writing. James Moffet (1983) as cited in (Romano, 2004, p. 170-71) states, "What we really want to help youngsters to learn is how to express ideas of universal value in a personal voice." Researching facts, analyzing facts, and expressing them in a narrative genre help to establish and promote a writer's voice. Young writers can discover universal truths about their topics, if given the freedom to slow down, observe, and, if they are allowed to experience writing through various literary perspectives that strengthen their voice. Moreover, Multigenre writing empowers students to discover "universal values" that stretch the boundaries of their topics. For instance, Lindsay discovered a universal value in her research on the Women's Suffrage Movement: women have not always had a voice in the political institutions of our country. She wondered why at one time in history, women were denied the vote. In her world, women have always been politically active, but she discovered this was not always the case.

Lindsay's inquiry centered on the question, "What rights do women have today that they didn't have in 1870?" While she researched the question, she developed other questions along the way such as, Who were the leaders of the Women's Suffrage Movement?, Why were women denied the vote?, What laws kept women from voting? She told me at one point during her research that she was angry and upset that women were denied the right to vote. Lindsay never knew that some women died for the cause of equality and the right to cast a ballot so their voices could be heard. She realized because of the sacrifice

these women made, she no longer had to fight that battle.

At the end of the Multigenre project, students complete a reflection questionnaire. One of the questions I ask students is what is the best piece of writing in your paper and why? Lindsay writes,

To me the best piece of writing was the “Decision Day” poem I wrote because I really thought hard about it. I put myself in those women’s shoes and expressed what I thought it would be like waiting to hear if I had the right to vote.

Lindsay’s voice rings true on the page because she saw herself in the moment. As she explained in her reflection, she is there with the women, waiting, longing to hear the words that would give them the right for their political voice to be heard. She creates a scene of hopeful anticipation at the end for the reader as the women wait, mingle, and whisper in the crowd. Lindsay expresses her learning in poetry by taking the perspective of one of the early advocates for women, Elizabeth Cady Stanton. She writes,

“It requires philosophy and heroism to rise above the opinion of the wise men of all nations and races.”

Elizabeth Cady Stanton

Decision Day

A gorgeous spring day, an everlasting
blue sky,
The sun shines brightly, the clouds
stretch wide--

A perfect day.

There’s a crowd that stretches for miles,
In front of a red brick courthouse.
Each woman’s face . . . hopeful . . .
anxious . . . waiting.

A breeze every now and then,
Gives each stressed heart a relieving sigh.
The constant murmur of women’s
voices--a chant, a prayer.

The old rusty door squeaks,
A hush roars through the crowd,
Impassive lawyers step out; desperate
whispers rise.

Hopeful faces turn toward the speaker,
A woman steps forward--the moment of
truth,
Did we reach our goal? Did we earn
success after all?

Desperately longing to hear good news
Desperately longing to hear good news
Desperately longing to hear good news

Lindsay

After weeks of exploring topics, writing, and revising, students compile and complete the finished papers. Reflective writing is the means I use to gauge what students have learned about themselves as writers, researchers, and thinkers. I want to know what was hard for them, what surprised them or what discoveries they made about their writing. From students’ comments, I know that writing the Multigenre paper was not easy but students are very proud of their accomplishments. For example, Allie writes, “The hardest part was thinking what to write and putting it on paper so that it made sense.” And Meredith explains, “The hardest part was

trying to group the different genres together.” Often, students are surprised with their own writing. Jessica reveals this in her reflection writing. She exclaims, “What surprised me was that I actually enjoyed writing a couple of pieces and liked the final results.” Katie responded, “It surprised me that I had so much expression in my paper. I felt strongly about this topic.”

Multigenre Research compels students to become authors of their own learning as Wilhelm and Edmiston (1998) propose. The authors suggest that “as students engage in their learning they make use of general learning skills and learning processes involving thinking, feeling, problem-solving . . . the idea is for students to develop rather than receive knowledge, and it recasts the metaphor for teaching from information transmission to one of knowledge construction” (p. 91). Because Multigenre research is student-centered writing, it immerses students in real authentic writing and skills of learning that expand the boundaries of themselves as writers, thinkers, researchers, and meaning-makers of their world. Multigenre research affords students the opportunity to move in new directions of thinking and writing. Multigenre research moves beyond the domain of traditional Language Arts instruction and, most importantly, it authors students to engage in their own learning. Consequently, the teacher becomes the coach, not an information giver.

Multigenre research is an inquiry based learning framework that helps students excel in high standards of learning. It demands much from students because it requires high level thinking,

analyzing, and synthesizing of information collected to create writing in genres that also require thinking, revising, and weighing different points of view to create an artistic collage of many color slide compositions that illustrate a holistic experience for the reader. If schools expect students to reach and excel to high standards of learning, then writing is the key that leads to higher standards of learning and complex thought. In *Because Writing Matters* (NWP and Nagin, 2006), the authors propose that writing is much more than a process. The authors state, “Writing is complex, and so is the instruction that a school must provide if its students are to reach the high standards of learning expected of them” (p. 9). Citing George Hillocks, the authors further argue that “teachers must do more with writing than simply teach its forms and model its processes. They need to help students develop the basic inquiry strategies common to most disciplines and incorporate them in their writing. Multigenre research is such a framework for developing these skills.

Lindsay and Katie are representative of the many students who are exposed to Multigenre research in my Language Arts classroom. Many of my students exhibit high levels of accomplishment in the skills of learning: problem-solving, critical thinking skills, and creative thinking. Because of the exposure and emersion of the Multigenre writing framework, students can become authors of their own learning if given the time to research, freedom to take risks with their writing, and the support they need to satisfy their innate curiosity to explore topics that mean something to them. Don Murray (1999) knows about writers as explorers. He states, “Writers

are the explorers society sends out to describe our public and private worlds... the explorer first seeks information” (118). Adolescents want and seek information. They are the explorers of

the next generation. What better way can we, as educators, ask our students to meet the challenging demands of higher learning than to expose them to the color slides of writing, Multigenre research.

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