

Mary Cathryn Ricker’s Multigenre Autobiography Unit

The capstone writing assignment for Mary Cathryn Ricker’s seventh-grade class is an autobiographical booklet that includes at least 15 different genres—from poems, memoirs, letters, and personal narratives to more unusual modes of expression like maps, photographs, and drawings.

In the early part of this seven-week unit, Mary Cathryn’s teaching follows a predictable routine. Using models to illustrate what she’s teaching, she gives her students a mini-lesson on a specific genre or revision strategy. Then she gives the class time to apply the lesson. As the students write, Mary Cathryn moves around the room offering individual encouragement and help. After the writing session, she usually breaks the class into pairs or small groups so the students can share their pieces and get feedback from their peers.

“Teaching Multigenre Writing” documents two days in Mary Cathryn’s class. During this time, she introduces her students to a new genre—a list of things they wish they could do. The students also mine for topics in their writer’s notebooks, review and practice the memoir, and begin poems based on a bilingual model.

Instructional Goals

Mary Cathryn’s multigenre unit helps her students to:

- Explore their identities.
- Understand that there are many different ways to express feelings and recount experiences.
- Review and practice familiar genres.
- Study and practice unfamiliar genres.
- Learn and practice revision strategies.
- Share their writing with others.
- Participate successfully in peer conferences.
- Create a rubric for scoring.

Materials

Sources for Models Used in Lessons

- Fleischman, Paul. *Joyful Noise: Poems for Two Voices*. New York: Harpercollins Juvenile Books, 1988. ISBN 0064460932
- Garcia, Juan Manuel. “Between Two Languages.” In Carden, Mary, ed. *I Am of Two Places: Children’s Poetry* (from the *Greetings! Keeping Tradition* series). Barrington, IL: Rigby Education. ISBN 0763531634.
- Meyers, Walter Dean. *Bad Boy: A Memoir*. Reprint Edition. New York: Amistad Press, 2002. ISBN 0064472884.
- Nelson, Marilyn. *Carver: A Life in Poems*. Chicago: Front Street Press, 2001. ISBN: 1886910537

- Spinelli, Jerry. *Knots in My Yo-Yo String: The Autobiography of a Kid*. New York: Knopf, 1998. ISBN: 0679887911.

Additional Materials Used in the Multigenre Unit

- Autobiography Assignment for English
- Revision Sheet
- Protocol for Peer Revising/Editing

Description of Featured Lessons

Mary Cathryn Ricker begins her multigenre unit by explaining the assignment and giving her seventh graders a sheet of requirements. At this point, she leads the students in a brainstorming session to establish a rubric for their autobiographies. Next, she introduces the class to Jerry Spinelli's *Knots in My Yo-Yo String*. Spinelli uses many different genres and forms in his autobiography, so it's an excellent model for the students' multigenre projects.

Mary Cathryn chooses one particular genre from the book—a list Spinelli wrote as an adolescent about things he'd like to be able to do—and uses it as a model for a quick write. She has the students take turns reading and commenting on items from the list. Then she has them take a few minutes to create their own lists in their writer's notebooks.

As the students write, Mary Cathryn goes from desk to desk, reading over their shoulders, asking them questions, and commenting on what they're saying. When the quick write is over, she asks them to share their lists with their neighbors.

Next, Mary Cathryn asks the students to “mine” for topics in their writer's notebooks. The students have been writing in their notebooks all year; and most, if not all, of the entries are personal in nature. So these notebooks are a rich source for ideas and material for an autobiography.

Mary Cathryn begins by demonstrating the process with her own writer's notebook. She picks out an entry and discusses how she might use it as the basis for a piece in her autobiography. Then she has the students go through their notebooks and use post-its to flag writing that might be used for the multigenre assignment. The class ends as a few of the students share the pieces they've marked and discuss how they might use them in their autobiographies.

The following day, Mary Cathryn teaches a brief mini-lesson on the memoir. This is a genre the students studied in the sixth grade, so the lesson is a review. Mary Cathryn quickly moves to models to help her students understand how they might frame their own memoirs. She reads aloud from four or five books, including Walter Dean Meyers' *Bad Boy: A Memoir* and *Carver*, a biography of George Washington Carver in verse.

Mary Cathryn ends the mini-lesson with a model from Spinelli's *Knots in My Yo-Yo String*. As the students begin to work on their own memoirs, she gives them the choice of using a sentence from Spinelli as a starter. Once again, Mary Cathryn takes advantage of the writing session to check on her students' individual progress.

When the class is through writing, Mary Cathryn has one or two students share what they've done. Then she introduces a revision mini-lesson on Barry Lane's “exploding the moment.” Once again, she uses models to illustrate the lesson—in this case, examples from other

seventh graders and an example from her own writing. The students practice the technique, and Mary Cathryn works individually with several students.

The final mini-lesson centers on a poem entitled “Between Two Languages,” written in both Spanish and English by a fifth-grade student named Juan Manuel Garcia. Mary Cathryn asks for two volunteers—one to read the Spanish version and one the English.

After the poem is read, the students discuss how Juan might use the poem to fulfill a requirement for the multigenre project. Then they break once more to begin writing their own poems. Since most of the students are second-language learners, Mary Cathryn gives them the option of following Juan’s lead and writing their poems in two languages. The lesson wraps up with a peer conference on the poems, followed by one or two students reading their pieces aloud to the rest of the class.

The pattern that Mary Cathryn has followed during these classes—mini-lessons, modeling, writing, conferencing, sharing, and revising—will continue throughout the unit as her students move toward their culminating project: a polished multigenre autobiography.