

Workshop 5: Teaching Multigenre Writing

Tom Romano's Reflections

Defining multigenre writing

Multigenre writing is, it's a piece of writing, right? But instead of being an expository monologue, as an essay is, or even a narrative monologue, as a short story or a personal reflection is, multigenre is a piece of writing that is composed of many different parts, many different genres. The trick is for each of the genres to work by itself so it's a complete piece of writing. Maybe you start with a poem and that poem will work and each piece of writing works in the multigenre paper. So there could be a news story in it, different kinds of poetry, haiku, free-verse, short anecdotes, dialogues, want ads—all of the different genres that you have in your paper, though, have the same, are about the same theme or about the same topic.

So, I guess, multigenre would be something like in the old days we used to watch slide shows, right, and each slide would be up on the screen and it would be complete in and of itself, but all of the slides taken together make a comment about the topic as a whole.

Opportunities to write narratives

I think the reason that the students generate so much energy and enthusiasm for multigenre is, one, there is so much freedom about what they can write. You know, after about junior high school kids stop writing stories and poems, genres of let's say narrative thinking where story is very important and image is important. What happens is they start writing, sometimes exclusively, expository essays. Nothing wrong with expository essays, much of the stuff that I write, that's what I write a lot of. But those students have written that so exclusively that when they have the opportunity to branch out and write all kinds of different genres to tell little stories, to write poems, to capture a succinct dialogue between two people, they just run with that.

Oftentimes my students will say when they start out they're kind of overwhelmed with what this is because I'll show them some examples and they'll be thinking, "I'll never have enough to write about." I have never found that that was the case; the opposite is true. Once they start to write, the writing generates more writing. The more writing they do, the more ideas they get for

other genres they can put into their paper.

Including the arts in multigenre projects

I'm this word guy. So when I started to do multigenre work with my students it was all about the language and the genres. I mean, that's still mainly what I do. But then I get a surprise where all of a sudden the students started to draw and do artwork in their multigenre paper. When they started to package their multigenre project in a unique way. There was one teacher I found out about who, in Oklahoma, packaging was a very important part of the project. So one of the students did a multigenre project on Ernest Hemingway and she brought her project in an Ernest Hemingway strongbox. So you opened up the strongbox for Hemingway and there were all of these genres then, letters and wedding announcements and divorce announcements, of course, for Ernest Hemingway. There was Gertrude Stein's hatbox. You know?

I never ceased to be amazed at how teachers take the concept of multigenre in ways that I never imagined. There's a teacher in San Antonio, Texas, who teaches ninth-graders, named Becky Hoegg. Becky is a drama person, right, a little drama person. So her students do these incredible presentations at the end where they, where their body is the instrument, and they're just amazing. Becky told me about one girl who did Claude Monet. Right? That was her multigenre topic. For her presentation the girl comes into the classroom early and sets it up with art easels and art of Monet's work. And on the last one is a partially completed painting. She is dressed as a nineteenth century French art curator and she brings the class in and she conducts them around each of the easels and then she sits down, from what Becky tells me, at the last one and demonstrates Monet's brush strokes.

I never would have asked for that. I don't think Becky would have, either. But if there is room for kids to roll their shoulders, you'll get that kind of thing.

The importance of and types of support students need

I think there is a danger in multigenre that I learned about the first year that I taught it and that is that, it was the first year I taught it and I wasn't supporting the kids. I showed them the example, and then I was like, let's go, and I wasn't giving them enough support all along the way. And so when I got the final papers, I think there were probably three out of 26 papers I didn't know what was going on. I was absolutely lost. One paper was about Tom Seaver the former baseball pitcher. I think I probably read three or four pages before I

would have known, if I hadn't, that he pitched baseballs. So I think there is a lot of support that teachers need to do all along the way.

And one is, let's say, talking to kids about how important the opening piece is in grounding the reader, and taking the reader by the hand, really, and leading them into your multigenre paper. So I spend a lot of time on, you know, what's going to be your opening piece? And these multigenre papers that we read, how did these people open their papers that invited you in? I think doing an introduction or a preface in many cases is crucial for a multigenre paper so you can lay some things out for the reader; not too long because you don't want them to stop reading. You know, an introduction. How many introductions do you read? My students largely skip the introductions, but I want them to do an opening piece that will take the reader by the hand and introduce your subject and bring them into the paper.

Unifying themes in multigenre papers

There's another aspect of multigenre that I think is difficult and that's the idea of unity in a multigenre paper; or, integration, one of my colleagues at Miami calls it. And I want to show my students how they can add unity to their multigenre paper. For example, maybe one girl wrote about her grandmother who had died several years before and she had an indelible moment that she wrote about her grandmother, who was Italian, at the stove making spaghetti sauce. Because whenever Andrea thought of her grandmother that's one of the first things she thought of and she described that. She described the way she was dressed and everything. She mentions in it, this green sweatshirt that she wore, grandma always wore, when she cooked. A Christmas sweatshirt with the appliqué Christmas thing falling off of it, you know? Well, I'm reading her paper and eight pages down into her paper then I come upon another genre that is a vivid description of that green sweatshirt. And as a reader I go, oh, yeah, I remember that, and I go back to that and I have a sense of fulfillment. I feel like the writer is filling in all the gaps in the story that I need to get. So I work real hard on that.

Providing students with models, practice, and support

The kids need to see some models of multigenre so they can get an idea of the territory. And I say models, not one model, but a number of different papers so they can get an idea of the flexibility and the range that they have. And I think the most important thing is the teachers have to work with them every step of

the way. It's not an assignment you can make and then four weeks later their multigenre papers are due. You have to support them. That includes, you know, after they've done their research or as they're doing their research to get the kids to try genres in their writing. It might not work out to be in their paper, but it might. And it's that thing where I like to get my students writing early, as early as I can because I know that their writing is going to generate more writing.

So I might ask them at some point to write the dream of a character, let's say, in a stream of consciousness. And so I would show them a number of dreams, read them a dream that I have written for a character, and then let them accumulate facts about the character's life and passions and fears, and talk about their dreams, of course, and then ask them to write the dream. I might ask them to identify indelible moments in the character's life, if they're researching a character, or try a free-verse poem. I mean, all along the way I want to get kids writing and I want to support them. I want to teach them about this unity, for example. Not right off the bat, but soon after they have gotten started so they can start to think about how they might tie their papers together. Support is crucial.

Different approaches to multigenre writing

Well, I look at multigenre in two ways or two different ways of doing it. One way is a multigenre paper about what I call the countryside of the soul. So they can write about something that they know deeply and personally. I mentioned the girl who wrote a multigenre paper about the character of her grandmother. Well, she didn't really have to do any research, she probably could have, but she just went on how she knew her grandmother and the stories about her grandmother and wrote her multigenre paper that way. There's also a multigenre research paper in which the students choose something to research and do that research and that's the grist for their writing mill.