

Multigenre Writing: A Tool to Improve Critical Thinking

David Wood

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Christian Knoeller, a National Writing Project author, references the modern conundrum in our pedagogical approaches to writing when he states too many schools have “conventionally gravitated toward a relatively narrow range of forms” (45). And yet, many in the academic community complain about the state of their students’ writing, reading, and critical thinking abilities. Additionally, Knoeller rails against how this tunnel vision has narrowed our views of audience, despite the consistent cries across many disciplines of making our students aware of the varied audiences that they need to be able to communicate with. Knoeller’s chastisement of our pedagogical practices concerning writing and thinking is important in that it might propel us to ask deliberate questions which might result in workable solutions for improving our students’ ability to read, write, and critical think. When we look at our goals for our classroom, how much focus do we apply to our goals of teaching reading, writing, and, most especially, critical thinking? Too often, many of us see these foundations as more resulting from our teaching of the subject matter rather than seeking better practices to achieve those goals. How might we, though, better re-envision our pedagogical practices by familiarizing ourselves with a seemingly radical method that can prove both rewarding for student and instructor alike?

First, it may be important to outline the current programmatic philosophy concerning how we evaluate the student’s knowledge and ability to critically think. For many disciplines, the tried and true research paper is the primary means for quantifying and qualifying students’ learning. This practice requires students to research and develop their ideas using a system of established conventions of that particular discipline’s discourse. It seems to be a system that works for both student and instructor, but with the advent of the online paper mills and research paper tutorials, the research paper is fast becoming trite in its demonstration of knowledge and therefore, possibly fallacious in evaluating the students’ abilities to read, write, and critically think. If we agree that research writing prospered in a “climate favoring originality and calling for the creation of knowledge” (Davis 424), then is it so hard to believe that a radical practice such as multigenre writing, which also advances these key ideas, should also be seen as a valuable tool for achieving these tasks?

Although not a new practice by any means, scholarship concerning multigenre writing begins in the mid-1990s. Since then, multigenre writing has seen a flurry of scholarship seeking to explain, to codify, and to show practical usage of the practice. What is multigenre writing, then? Multigenre writing is a practice that produces creative results in order to measure students’ understanding of an idea, event, or phenomena. It is not a loose collection of genres authored by poets or classic authors; it is the creative work of our students to make meaning of their subject matter. In that creative work, we can see their ability to read, write, and critically think. The

multigenre essay is full of creative musings, but in itself, it is the making of meaning based on experience, knowledge, and the application of said knowledge. It is a means for the author to “teach” their audience by creating a product that challenges an audience to read and critically think about the meaning that is being made. The author must weave more than just standard academic discourse in crafting their analysis. He must demonstrate knowledge not in a litany of examples, but by demonstrating more through showing rather than telling. This “showing” demonstrates the student’s ability to critically think about the subject matter and their audience’s ability to make meaning of that subject matter. Additionally, these kinds of projects can refine thinking, writing, and reading because it forces the student to extensively research the focus of their essay. Without a doubt, it aids in the students finding a more detailed and authentic response. What of the scholarship that supports the incorporation of multigenre writing?

Too many articles discuss the use of multigenre writing in either the high school or collegiate advanced composition classrooms; thereby dissuading potential instructors from venturing further. Additionally, few articles discuss and show the long-term benefits of incorporating multigenre writing in the classroom. The lack of any real discussion across disciplines also reflects the experimental persona of this pedagogical technique. With this disparity, it might make one wonder as to the actual relevance then of writing about multigenre writing as a pedagogical practice. Many instructors, especially those of freshmen, feel the pull of service-course oriented leanings, the push to teach critical reading and critical thinking with little assistance on how to accomplish those tasks, and of course, the possibly horrifying realization that they have only so much time to teach so much. As odd as it may sound, the multigenre essay can accomplish all of these competing aspects. Additionally, to my surprise, scholars across disciplines are making use of multigenre writing techniques in their attempts to communicate to their implied audiences. Who would have thought that an introduction to a Math software-how-to guide would make use of dialogue to communicate to its audience? Theodore W. Gray and Jerry Glynn do exactly that in their addition to their introduction for The Beginner’s Guide to *Mathematica* V4. By using dialogue, Gray and Glynn persuade their audience of mostly first year college students to join in the conversation concerning the reliance on software in educational practices.

In any discussion of multigenre writing and pedagogical practices would be incomplete without mentioning the shaping of this practice’s discourse. The theoretical and practical work established by Tom Romano, Julie Jung, and Kathleen Yancey Blake establish the rationale, applications, and evaluative tools for assisting instructors in incorporating this practice in their classroom. For those instructors, who believe without doubt in the merits of the standard research paper, it should be noted that Robert Davis and Mark Shadle’s essay, “‘Building a Mystery’: Alternative Research Writing and the Academic Art of Seeking,” establishes a bridge between research writing, theoretical aspects of multigenre writing, and the active classroom incorporation of multigenre writing. Davis and Shadle proscribe a type of alternative research writing that “inscribes an inclusive cross-disciplinary academy, which mixes the personal and the public and values the imagination as much as the intellect” (422). This new alternative research writing does not destroy the value of research-based work; it seeks, though, to place new emphasis on the act of seeking, rather than the act of certainty. This type of writing would be invaluable not only in the freshmen composition and literature classrooms, but it could prove useful in a variety of disciplines. What exactly, though, is multigenre writing?

Noted multigenre scholar, Tom Romano, defines multigenre writing as “arising from research, experience, and imagination. A multigenre paper is 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” (x-xi). Assisting in a more theoretical approach, Julie Jung, sees multigenre writing as a tool of a *revisionary rhetor*, or a writer that understands that meaning frequently is “partial, even contradictory” (30). Jung continues by describing the current atmosphere of rigid student expectations and the argument that multigenre writing faces when she states, “Anything that smacks of fun or pleasure is bound to be devalued in academic contexts, sites where rigor is synonymous with drudgery, and everything else is, well, cute” (xvi). Additionally, the practice is not without its own controversial aspects such as: instructor familiarity with teaching genres and the conventions of those genres; the possible drift of the assignment towards the personal essay rather than academic work; and the dearth of conclusive research on the long-term effects of multigenre practices on critical thinking, but this concern may be one more born from the relatively new scholarship being conducted on the subject.

Despite these concerns, reading, writing, and critical thinking in the Twenty-First Century require the ability to see and understand outside of older modes of discourse. Students make sense of and create knowledge in a variety of informational spaces that are by no means relying on the conventions of just one discourse or mode. Therefore, multigenre writing allows students to understand the rationale of authorial choice and rhetorical awareness in the space of making meaning; thereby demonstrating their ability to read, write, and critically think. Is multigenre writing as a teaching practice something for every classroom? Probably not, but the digital age brings many genres outside of the normal community’s discourse into the making of meaning. Despite the concerns, many instructors of multigenre writing believe in this approach because it allows for students to display not only their knowledge, but also their passion for the knowledge that students make in this differentiated composition. In conclusion, multigenre writing creates a workable solution for improving critical thinking by offering students and instructors a new way of critically engaging in the sharing and making of knowledge.

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Yancey, Kathleen Blake. “Writing in the 21st Century: A Report from the National Council of Teachers of English.” 2 Mar 09. NCTE. Feb 2009. <www.ncte.org>.

Young, S. and Barone, D. Writing Without Boundaries: What’s Possible When Students Combine Genres. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 2008.

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Davis, Robert and Mark Shadle. “‘Building a Mystery’: Alternative Research Writing and the Academic Art of Seeking.” College Composition and Communication. 51:3 (Feb 2000): 417-46. JSTOR. United States Military Academy 23 Aug 2007 <www.jstor.org>.

Although Davis and Shadle’s essay does not articulate the multigenre essay in the way that I have thought about it, they do formulate an intriguing counter-argument to the traditional research paper. These authors’ describe their idea as a sort of alternative research writing. They espouse a change from the traditional research writing of conquering and owning knowledge to a research writing that is more passionate and delves more into the mystery of the subject. They advocate a research process and writing that revels in the uncertainty and mystery involved in

understanding any subject. Davis and Shadle describe this new process as an “altered conception of inquiry” (422). The essay also offers a history of the research paper and then actually discussing a variety of techniques for building an alternative research writing project.

Gillespie, Joanne. “‘It would be fun to do again’: Multigenre Responses to Literature.” Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy. 48:8 (May 2005): 678-84. JSTOR. United States Military Academy. 20 Oct 2007 <www.jstor.org>.

Although Gillespie’s article focuses on her seventh grade students’ reactions to crafting multigenre essays in response to a literary work, it offers practical lessons and reminders for incorporating multigenre writing as a means to integrate reading, writing, and talking about literature. She describes the kinds of goals that teachers seeking to incorporate these practices must strive for such as: “moving students from ‘perfunctory to committed writing’” (678); “understanding what each genre entails” (679); and arming students for “‘finding their passion’” (680). Gillespie also discusses the problems that her class had such as a fear of the project descending into triviality or that not enough class time was spent studying the different aspects of each genre. In the end, she does an excellent job of showing how her project met the goals of the NCTE *Standards for the English Language* and how this project worked to develop her students’ writing and critical thinking abilities.

Glasgow, Jacqueline N. “Radical Change in Young Adult Literature Informs the Multigenre Paper.” The English Journal. 92:2 (Nov 2002): 41-51. JSTOR. United States Military Academy. 24 Oct 08 <www.jstor.org>.

Glasgow’s essay debunks the assumption that our students understand, or more aptly put: are critically aware, of the conventions that define a variety of genres, especially those genres that they see in their daily lives such as emails, cartoons, news articles, etc. She primarily attempts to establish a practical method to teaching the multigenre paper rather than the typical experimentation approach. Her pedagogical method relies on modeling in order for her students to “examine the writer’s purpose, techniques for story development, and ways to represent the message using various genres” (41).

Grierson, Sirpa T. “Circling through Text: Teaching Research through Multigenre Writing.” The English Journal. 89:1 (Sep 1999): 51-5. JSTOR. United States Military Academy. 23 Aug 07 <www.jstor.org>.

This essay describes the process that Grierson used to incorporate multigenre writing into her class research project. She outlines the steps that drive her use of this practice and a weekly categorization of events and products that the students must provide. Grierson also discusses why she likes to incorporate this form of project into her lesson planning and why she continues to modify her prompts. She believes that this type of project is essential in preparing students to refine their critical thinking techniques and how this type of writing allows students to take risks and therefore, almost always, presents a more honest and reflective type of writing.

Jung, Julie. Revisionary Rhetoric, Feminist Pedagogy, and Multigenre Texts. Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 2005.

In contrast to Tom Romano's work, Julie Jung establishes a theoretical discourse surrounding the rationale for teaching multigenre writing. She situates her work within the context of establishing multigenre writing as a viable and productive academic exercise. She analyzes metadiscursivity and intertextuality as part of what she sees as the revisionary rhetoric that multigenre writing can accomplish. Jung believes that multigenre writing not only influences the author's ability to read, write, and think critically, but that this type of practice works to influence the audience's critical thinking in that it improves the academic reader's (who we might argue is a good reader) ability to make meaning. In other words, as the reader attempts to make sense of the different genres, the reader will need to "confront their confusions by reading more fully and contextually" (34). Jung works to also show how critical reflection used in multigenre writing fosters more critical thinking.

Knoeller, Christian. "Imaginative Response: Teaching Literature through Creative Writing." The English Journal. 92:5 (May 2003): 42-48. JSTOR. United States Military Academy. 24 Oct. 2008. <www.jstor.org>.

This essay is referenced by many multigenre scholars due to Knoeller's discussion of the application of "imaginative response" in studying literature. He discusses the idea of a "natural symbiosis of 'reading as a writer'" (42). Knoeller defines "imaginative response" as "responding to a piece of literature by writing creatively in any imaginative genre other than exposition and argument" (43). Although his article makes great strides in tying critical thinking to reading as a writer, his particular audience for this essay is high school teachers. Additionally, Knoeller makes more of multigenre as a by-product of response, rather than invention. He does discuss his interpretation of Romano's work and how his students have described multigenre writing as "researching a work with the imagination" (47). Much of my research work has been on proving that multigenre writing can work on multiple levels (response, invention, inquiry, etc.) at the collegiate-level.

Romano, Tom. Blending Genre, Altering Style: Writing Multigenre Papers. Portsmouth, NH: Boynton/Cook Publishers, 2000.

Any discussion of multigenre writing in the university would be moot without the mention of Tom Romano's name. This book is a must-read for any instructor interested in multigenre writing. His work focuses on the practical aspects of teaching, writing, and evaluating multigenre projects. Not only does he analyze his teaching methods, but also he shows student examples of what I describe as "true" multigenre essays due to their reliance on "other" genres, rather than standard academic prose. The book, itself, is a confidence booster for those instructors attempting to incorporate this practice in their classroom. Without a doubt, Romano's work shapes the discourse language of multigenre writing in academia.

Valeri-Gold, Maria and Mary P. Deming. "Reading, Writing, and the College Developmental Student." Handbook of College Reading and Study Strategy Research. Ed. Rona F. Flippo and David C. Caverly. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum, 2000. 149-173.

Basing their research on an exhaustive study of reading and writing scholarship dating from the mid-1960s to today, Valeri-Gold and Deming develop a well-supported argument concerning the integration of reading and writing practices with developing college students. This chapter describes the cognitive similarities that reading and writing have and argues for better integration of reading-writing connections when working with developmental students (149). Though this text focuses primarily on those developmental college students, rather than most of our Academy's students, and does not address multigenre writing in the classroom directly, the authors describe current research as seeing "that both reading and writing involve the making of meaning" (149); an aspect of learning that many instructors do not give enough attention to in their classes. In their analysis, they discuss the correlation between and the symbiotic relationship between reading and writing. They point to how a combine pedagogical approach will assist students in developing their critical thinking abilities.

Virtanen, Tuija and Helena Halmari. "Persuasion Across Genres: Emerging Perspectives." Persuasion Across Genres: A Linguistic Approach. Ed. Helena Halmari. Philadelphia: John Benjamins Pub, 2004. 3-25.

Virtanen and Halmari's work seeks to show how the rhetorical application of persuasion is best seen in the analysis of genre. Their efforts best reflect on a theoretical understanding of genre and persuasion, but possibly, their work also may cast a renewed look at how an understanding of genre both in reading and practice through writing may assist students in their ability to construct critical knowledge about reading and writing. If students better understand how genres influence their opinion, then they may be better able to construct logical counter-arguments. If students are aware of how genre can persuade, then maybe they will re-see their argumentative efforts. If anything, their argument works to show how genre choices reflect the interests of a discourse community, but how genre may also act successfully outside of that discourse community. A great example of this "other" genre as a tool of persuasion, one could read Theodore W. Gray's and Jerry Glynn's excerpt from The Beginner's Guide to *Mathematica* V4. This fascinating piece introduces the mathematics software, *Mathematica*, but uses the genre of dialogue rather than standard academic prose to influence its intended audience.

Yancey, Kathleen Blake. "More Than a Matter of Form." Coming of Age: The Advanced Writing Curriculum. Portsmouth, NH: Boynton/Cook, 2000. 87-93.

Much of Yancey's work focuses on re-interpreting the composition and literary classrooms. In this essay, she explores the connection between students' use and understanding of genre and rhetorical situation. The fascinating aspect of her practice in a collegiate advanced composition course is how she not only had her students experiment with different genres, but how she asked her students to reflect on that experimentation (91). As many studies are showing, reflection is a key component to developing critical thinking. As for this practice, it allows students to demonstrate new knowledge in their ability to explain how genre works.