Multigenre Projects
A Better Alternative to Teaching Research

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Abstract: Research and research reporting skills are an essential part of learning in and beyond school. While most teachers recognize the importance of teaching research, traditional research teaching methods are less effective than they might be. Multigenre research projects offer a more authentic and engaging way of teaching research in the classroom. Using a variety of writing genres as tools, students are able to create layers of meaning in writing and unite multiple genre artifacts to build a holistic and real-world model of information found in research. This project-based approach gives students the opportunity to use critical thinking and inquiry skills in order to problem solve their way through high-level thinking challenges. The multigenre project's authentic and challenging nature make it a more effective model than traditional methods for teaching research in the classroom.

Introduction

The traditional research paper has long been a staple in English Language Arts classrooms. The ultimate objective of the traditional research paper is to develop students' skills in research and ensure students can clearly and effectively report their findings. Teaching students the ability to research, to learn how to learn, is an important goal, especially in a world evolving as quickly as ours in both technology and context. As educators, however, we ourselves need to constantly adopt new ideas and to reevaluate traditional teaching methods in light of those new methods, even tried-and-true traditional methods like assigning students to write typical research papers.

The traditional research paper, though popular, presents several big problems. An over-emphasis on form when using a traditional research paper discourages student synthesis and creativity. As Hillocks (2005) writes, "teachers of writing in the schools still appear to rely heavily on teaching the forms and devices of writing while neglecting how to work with content" (p. 240). Rather than processing the material they have researched, traditional research papers too often encourage students to provide a summary of that material plugged into a required format, which requires little more than paraphrasing research.

This single-format instruction is both unchallenging (for the reason described above), and also inauthentic (Mack, 2002). In the real world, students will use letters, memos, emails, presentations, phone calls, and many various methods to communicate personally and professionally, but the ability to write a traditional research paper is useless outside of academia. Without personal interest or relevance, even students who are motivated to do the paper well are likely externally motivated, working only for a grade or other reward. To create lifelong learners, if our goal in teaching research is to teach students to learn for themselves, we need to find a better alternative method, one that challenges students and is more intrinsically motivating, because it is more linked to real-world writing practices.

One alternative to the traditional research paper is the multigenre project. Originally presented by Romano (1995), it has been explored and expanded since by many teachers looking for better ways to teach research. I used this type of research project in my own teaching with much success. If you're a teacher who has not seen multigenre projects before, I encourage you to look at examples; a google search or google image search will yield myriad results to give you a clear idea of what a published multigenre project looks like. Multigenre projects focus on the writing (read: "creating") process, which involves inquiry, critical thinking, and creativity (Hillocks, 2005). Students must begin with an idea synthesized from research and use genre as a tool, evaluating merits of different communication strategies to find how to best make their points. A multigenre project requires creativity and challenges students to juggle abstraction and plurality in problem solving and writing (Styslinger, 2006). It engages students in the writing process from multiple different perspectives and challenges them to evaluate not only what to say, but how to say it. Authentic and relevant classroom work helps motivate student work, which results in deeper engagement with challenging material. The research backs up what I found in my personal experience, which is that multigenre projects are truly a better alternative to teaching research. "It's time for us to join the future and support all forms of 21st century literacies, inside and outside school" (Yancey, 2009).

The Multigenre Alternative

Working on a multigenre project, students research a topic using online and offline sources, but report research in an exceptional way. Students choose multiple different reporting methods, depending on their findings. They begin by synthesizing ideas from their research, then choose whichever genre most effectively makes their point, and create an artifact to impart what they learned. Each artifact should communicate its own independent point, but all should fit together under a unified theme or idea (LeNoir, 2002). Teachers determine the number of resources and genres that are required of students and how they'll be graded, but students determine all else about how the project turns out.

Students develop voice in a multigenre project (Styslinger, 2006). It requires them to become active researchers, researchers who not only find information, but organize it, evaluate it, and report it in authentic and effective ways. Finding this voice and putting together a portfolio of different genre artifacts that unify into one project is cognitively challenging and requires creativity, problem-solving, and commitment.

Challenging Students to Think

It often happens when writing a traditional research paper that students simply summarize their sources together and don't synthesize, evaluate, or think about the information. In a multigenre project, research becomes an inquiry process (Hillocks, 2005). Students must think about what is important, why it's important, and what it means in the big picture. In order to do this, they must pay close attention and dig deeply into research. This inquiry is the beginning of the writing process. Once the

students have an idea, they move on to synthesis. The focus on content before form ensures that students engage with research beyond simple summary.

Multigenre projects not only require students to assess value of information from research, but also to evaluate how those points can best be presented. This part of the writing process involves many high level cognitive functions, and gives students the opportunity to address communication as real-world problem-solving (Dickinson, DeGraff, & Foard, 2002). Genre can add layers of meaning to text, so encouraging students to take advantage of using genre properly can give them writing tools for success in the future (Mack, 2002). Technology also is used as a tool when using various genres for reporting. Students in my classroom used technology not only to research their topic of choice, but also to research various genres and to create various genres. Looking ahead, it seems natural that multigenre projects will evolve along with technology as students become more comfortable using technology and technology becomes an even more capable tool (Beach & O'Brien, 2005). These opportunities to use genre and technology to aid communication are not possible with more traditional approaches to teaching research and are one of the great advantages multigenre projects have to offer.

Plagiarism of course becomes a concern in this project because in-text citations are not always possible, and often would interfere with the authenticity of the artifact (Moulton, 1999). Many teachers, myself included, have addressed this by using reflection paragraphs or endnotes associated with artifacts. In these short explanations, students justify their thinking in genre selection, clarify any purposeful deviations, and cite and expound on the resources they used when creating each artifact. These reflection paragraphs are valuable for a number of reasons: they encourage reflection on the writing process, ensure students are thoroughly considering where their facts came from, and encourage metacognition throughout the research and writing process. The scenario below, is an example of a reflection paragraph from my Freshmen English I class.

> *When I began this project, I told one of friends my topic. They said "Why, you aren't going to change anything." This is an example of trying to keep a woman quiet. Even powerful women have to deal with silencing. Senator Elizabeth Warren was shushed whilst reading a letter written by Coretta Scott King (Dame Magazine) which shows that even powerful women have to deal with silencing. "If a woman utilizes her voice ina powerful way, or shakes up systems that are firmly in face, she will be subject to an abysmal, hack, silencing-method known as punishment." (Dame Magazine) I used a poem make the idea I am sharing sound powerful and strong because that it was feminism is all about.*

The text above is an example of a student's reflective writing. The artifact she is reflecting on in this paragraph is a poem she wrote, entitled "Be Quiet," in which she uses the refrain "Be quiet. / Be silent," to drive home a message about the silencing of women's voices. While her poem makes a powerful point, her reflection shows that she carefully considered how to use genre as a tool to help communicate what she found important in her research. She was inspired by a personal connection, and effectively used her research and creativity to express herself.

Challenging students to engage in higher-level thinking throughout the process of research and reporting gives them opportunities to practice essential problem-

solving, critical-thinking, and inquiry skills. Encouraging student creativity and building layers of meaning using genre creates an authentic authorial experience. Metacognition and reflection are also an important part of the writing process in multigenre projects and help students grow as learners. These cognitive challenges that students face throughout multigenre projects aren't a part of more traditional methods, and are challenges that help students develop research and reporting skills beyond simple summary.

Motivating Research

One of the biggest problems with traditional research papers is that many students won't engage; even students who complete the papers often simply fill in a formulaic document without much thought. While multigenre projects give students ample opportunities to engage deeply with research and production, they also encourage students to want to engage with the challenge presented to them.

Multigenre projects give students opportunities to express their own voices and connect with learning on a personal level. Authentic work on artifacts that are found in real life motivates students to create professional-quality pieces. Producing authentic artifacts that one might see in the real world is important and exciting for students (Yancey, 2009). When a student in my class struggled with choosing a genre I would ask, "Where in the real world would you find information like this?" This question inspired the creation of artifacts including a doctor's office brochure, a dance studio flyer, a fan letter, a juxtaposed weekly schedule, and a blog post. Traditional research papers aren't seen in the real world and are written according to a formula provided by a particular teacher. In contrast, when a student has an idea for a doctor's office brochure, the audience becomes a waiting room of people; a student creating a dance studio flyer is writing for potential customers; a student writing a fan letter is writing for a favorite celebrity. Real world artifacts created for real world audiences are relevant and exciting (Brimi, 2012). When a student successfully creates a real world professional-looking memo or pamphlet, he or she is (and perhaps more importantly, feels) ready for the real world. When the work is authentic, then the work is important, relevant, and exciting.

In addition, the multigenre project motivates and encourages students with built-in differentiation (Hughes, 2009). Because there are unlimited options for reporting the results of their research, individual students can find ones that work and that play to their strengths. Students are able to choose genres that they're comfortable working with, and so are more likely to take risks in using those genres unconventionally, which increases their own understanding of how to work with that particular type of writing, and leads them to be confident in their own learning. Beyond this, giving the class time for independent work frees the teacher to engage in writing conferences and interventions, and at the same time puts students in charge of their own learning, which gives them ownership and encourages them to invest in their education (Hughes, 2009). With scaffolding and support, every student can succeed in this kind of project, no matter his or her strengths or weaknesses. Figure 1 offers another example from my English I class.
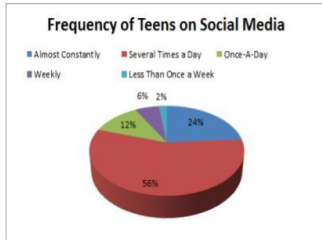
Figure. 1. A slide from a presentation about teens and social media. The student who made this slideshow, who is cognitively disabled and on an IEP, used statistics from his research to create graphs which he presented in a slide show. This figure demonstrates how scaffolded learning guided by student interest can motivate students to achieve at high levels.

Giving students the opportunity to use their strengths and preferences to report their research can encourage them to take risks. When students feel confident and comfortable, they are more likely to try something new. When those attempts succeed, with the assistance of teacher guidance and scaffolding, students gain confidence in their abilities to learn, and so become more likely to take risks in the future and to continue to grow. For example, in my English I class, one student who struggled with reading and writing but was a strong math and science student, was excited by the fact that she could use a graph to convey information in her project. Taking charge of the project for herself, she sprang into action, surveying the class about their musical preferences, asking what kind of music was their favorite.

Allowing students the freedom to explore this project for themselves and do what they feel confident in encourages them to invest in their own learning (Allen, Swistak, & Smith, 2004). Their successes and excitement over well-made artifacts will snowball as they take ownership of their project and it becomes about more than just a grade. While it requires teachers to give up some control, the reward is well worth it. Students who invest in their own work are motivated, engaged, and a joy to work with (Bailey & Carroll, 2010).

The multigenre project is also student-centered in allowing students to choose their own topic to research. This topic should be something they have personal interest in or background with (Allen, Swistak, & Smith, 2004). We spent an entire hour in our classroom discussing topic choice in small groups, doing a topic accountability activity. When a student has a personal interest or connection to a topic, he or she is intrinsically motivated to engage in and sustain research, and willingly looks deeply for information. This motivation can also help students to make connections outside the classroom and encourage them to take their learning with them (Bailey & Carroll, 2010). Figure 2 shows an excerpt from a 5-page narrative written by a freshman student who had personal interest in her topic and found connections between her research and personal life.

> Three Seconds left on the clock,
> and it's the finals that could be all
> in our hands. I look at the fans
> who's all screaming were up by three
> Points, while I'm at the free throw.
> My Palms are sweating I wipe them
> on my shorts look up buzz ...
>
> My Story didn't start off as me
> always being a basketball Player, see
> I was born is Akron, Ohio and grew
> up with my mother. I haven't introduced
> myself, but hey I'm LeBron, yes LeBron
> James that's me. I been through
> many Struggles as a child like
> moving house to house also
> sleeping on couches instead of
> beds. My mother was never
> home she was either Partying
> out with Friends or some where
> drinking since she had lost her
> Job. I always stayed home from
> School because I spent most
> of my time Playing video games
> also going out for snacks with
> my mothers EBT Card, those were
> the good ole days until it even
> got better.

Figure 2. An example of student work, "How It All Started." This example shows how student creativity can be sparked when a student truly becomes an expert on a topic. This student researched LeBron James. Her narrative begins with an attention-grabbing introduction at the center of the action during a basketball game, then flashes to an aside in which LeBron tells the reader all about his childhood. In her reflection, this student explains parallels she sees between her own childhood and LeBron's. At the end of the narrative, the reader is pulled back into the game, LeBron makes the basket and reflects on how his difficult childhood made him who he is and how he is thankful for his life. She used the flashback structure to demonstrate her own personal interpretation that LeBron probably didn't appreciate his childhood except in retrospect. It's an impressive example of a student digging deeply into research and relating facts from information reading in a personal, creative, and powerful way. Her motivation for creativity began with a topic she enjoyed personally and continued to evolve as she found personal connections with her research.

Making research and reporting relevant to students' lives, strengths, and interests makes the multigenre project not only a great way to get even reluctant students to engage, but also a lot of fun for both students and teachers. Students can create high quality artifacts with real-world relevance, use genres they're comfortable with as risk-taking launching-pads, and sustain their interest through personal connections with their research. With all these advantages over traditional research papers, multigenre projects can inspire intrinsic motivation in students to encourage lifelong learning.

Conclusion

As educators, we aim to inspire students to grow into lifelong learners. Research and reporting skills play a big part in students' abilities to continue to further their own

education outside of school, but traditional methods aren't challenging or motivating enough to give students the best opportunities for growth. Multigenre research projects challenge and inspire students, and should be used in any classroom as an alternative to traditional research papers in order to give students an authentic (and fun) authorial experience.

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