

MEDIATING CREATIVE DIALOGUE: MULTIGENRE WRITING PROJECTS IN A CORE COURSE

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Art that is answerable seeks to continue its dialogue with others.

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This winter, I will be teaching a core course entitled “Women and the Wild West,” exploring literary and historical accounts of women as agents of continuity and change in the American west. This course is designed for the unique student population at The Women's College, where older, non-traditional female students mingle with more typical female undergraduates to create an especially vibrant learning community diverse in age, race and socio-economic class. Our students bring a wide variety of life experiences to the classroom; immersion in this rich diversity is an essential component of The Women's College experience.

One of the goals of “Women and the Wild West” is broadening students' perspectives of the history of the American west through encounters with diverse voices and genres, combining a multicultural and a multigenre approach. This course will peel back the mythic frontier narrative at the core of our national identity, and consider the roles women play within, and without, this central myth. Students will read historical and fictional narratives of women's experiences in exploring, settling and living in the American frontier, creating western homes and communities, conforming to and rebelling against stereotypes and social norms, and advocating for social and legal change. Students will experience a diverse variety of western women's voices, and discover how women of different nationalities and socioeconomic backgrounds negotiated conflicts arising from a clash of values, crossed social and cultural boundaries, and contributed to multicultural western societies.

A cornerstone of the students' experience in this course will be the creation of a multigenre project. Students will create

three distinct pieces of writing in three different genres, with an introduction/preface and a conclusion/epilogue, organized around a major theme or issue explored in our course. This project is designed to broaden students' engagement of the assigned readings and expand their writing repertoires; develop their abilities to write in different voices, utilizing different styles and techniques, for different audiences; and allow students to experience writing as an exploratory adventure and a vehicle for creative dialogue.

A multigenre project is uniquely suited to accomplish these goals. It requires students to engage assigned material in a more intense, complete way. To generate a creative response, students must first absorb and internalize the material, and then translate what they have learned into a new work of art. The individual creations must then be strategically arranged to create a coherent, meaningful whole. The strategic arrangement of these pieces places them into dialogue with each other. The connections between the pieces and their contributions to an overarching theme, issue or thesis is the dialogic heart of a multigenre work.

In order to create the most effective experience for my students, I conducted a brief literature review to determine why, and how, other teachers design and use multigenre projects. I also wanted to anticipate potential problems and consider possible solutions. While Tom Romano originally blazed the multigenre trail in *Blending Genre, Blending Style: Writing Multigenre Papers*, I found Nancy Mack's website, “Multigenre Report Writing,” to be the most helpful resource, chock full of practical advice and sample assignments.

Nancy Mack advocates that “[m]ultigenre writing has the potential to make use of the dialogic quality of language” (94). For the multigenre projects designed by Dr. Mack, students researched “historical contexts” and “multiple perspectives of the same event,” and then wrote from these “multiple perspectives.” This experience “precipitated more complexity and conflict in students’ representations of a selected event” (92). Mack discovered that multigenre work fosters an appreciation of a variety of voices and complex issues, avoiding reductionist thinking that divides the world into pure “pro” and “con” positions. In creating a multigenre project, students are required to integrate factual information into an original, meaningful text. This type of work requires a higher order of thinking and reasoning than simply recalling or reciting facts (97).

Using multigenre projects alters the student-teacher relationship in significant ways. Sirpa T. Grierson encourages her students to “walk around the subjects, attempting to view them from all angles, until they are no longer two-dimensional, but intimate acquaintances” (52). Such work puts each student in a position to create his or her own learning experience, with gentle guidance from the teacher. Diane D. Painter describes a process in which teachers “became facilitators and coaches of learning,” letting “go of a totally teacher-directed instructional style,” while students “constructed their own knowledge” (292-3). Because each student had more control over his or her own learning, Painter found that multigenre projects successfully engaged students with different “abilities, learning styles and interests” (293).

Like their teachers, the students themselves become mediators or facilitators of their own work in assembling a multigenre project. Michelle Tremmel uses Mikhail Bakhtin’s concept of dialogism to explore the polyphonic nature of multigenre writing. She explains: “What happens in a polyphonic novel or multigenre piece is that the author becomes less an absolute ruler and more a mediator or orchestral conductor who, while not abdicating his or her authorial

responsibility, executes that responsibility by maximizing the dialogue among voices.” This work “helps writers understand the authentic discourses that circulate in various genres and the way they interact with each other” (4). Assembling multigenre projects requires students to step back and assess their writing in a new way, and to evaluate the effectiveness of the dialogue they are creating.

The dialogic nature of the multigenre paper generates both its educational benefits and its major challenges. W. David LeNoir warns that the “seemingly boundless array of options” available in a multigenre paper may be overwhelming to students used to writing traditional expository essays (99). Perhaps the biggest challenge is the need to organize individual pieces into a coherent whole. As a result, LeNoir recommends the following “warning label” for multigenre papers: “Caution: Requires unity. (Not supplied.)” (100). LeNoir explains:

The point of a multigenre paper is to convey a unified message through means that reflect the richness of experience, so this unity must be reflected not only in the content of the individual elements, but also by how they work together ... For multigenre authors, unity is the lens through which their reader is able to see their unique visions (100).

Unity in a multigenre paper is not a matter of serendipity; it can only be achieved through the conscious effort of the author. This crucial issue must be effectively conveyed to students through, e.g., consideration of multigenre models that achieve or do not achieve unity, and brainstorming organizational strategies or structural arrangements in writing workshops and one-on-one conferences.

In working with her students, Nancy Mack emphasizes the “aesthetic meaningfulness” of a multigenre project (91).

Mediating creative dialogue to ensure internal unity and meaning is the core challenge of a multigenre project – for both students and teachers. Nancy Mack addresses this challenge through a series of scaffolding exercises, brainstorming sessions and specific classroom discussions about unity and coherence in multigenre projects (“Multigenre Report Writing”).

After exploring these teachers’ experiences with multigenre writing, I designed assignments intended to guide students through a series of dialogues with the assigned literature, with each other and with themselves. First, each student will be required to maintain a reading journal, and will engage the assigned readings through a series of suggested writing prompts. These informal journal entries will not be formally graded, but will be shared during discussions in class and on a discussion board on Blackboard. Hopefully, these reading journals and discussions will serve as raw material for the students’ multigenre creations.

Class time will be spent in discussing how multigenre projects are constructed, reviewing samples found on-line and discussing characteristics of successful multigenre works. The need for unity and a clear central theme will be especially emphasized. Students will brainstorm ideas for their projects, and then submit proposals for their final project identifying a specific theme, issue or thesis to be addressed. After these proposals are approved, students will turn in two formal pieces in different genres, receive feedback on these works, and have an opportunity to revise them. Students will engage in peer review workshops, reading and responding to each other’s multigenre writing, and then engage in additional revision of their final projects.

From the outset, it is crucial to assist the students in developing a central theme for their multigenre projects. Before they begin work on these projects, each student must submit a proposal for my approval, as described in this assignment:

Key Question: *You need to draft one key question you would like to explore in your multigenre paper. This question should be written as a question; e.g., “What roles did women play in settling the wild west?” or “What choices did women have about the lives they lived in the wild west?” Because you will be “living” with this question for the rest of this course, develop an issue that especially interests you.*

This question will not be written in stone; you are encouraged to revise or refine your key question as your exploration progresses. However, this initial question will provide guidance as you begin to create your multigenre pieces. It should help you to maintain focus as you write, and serve as a launching pad for further inquiry. If you have identified relevant sub-issues that might be explored, please write those down, as well. Be sure to keep careful notes about your exploration of these issues as your multigenre paper progresses; you can use these notes when you are drafting your prologue/introduction or epilogue/conclusion.

Brief description of how will you address your key question: *Begin to brainstorm about how you will explore your key question. What sources might serve as helpful background reading? What voice(s) or character(s) would yield interesting responses? What genre(s) might you use to express your ideas?*

Examples of multigenre papers *on a variety of topics have been posted on Blackboard under Websites.*

After I have helped the students craft a good working issue, they will work on this multigenre project:

Using your reading journals, Blackboard posts, class notes and other writings as raw material, weave together a minimum of 3 polished pieces in at least 3 different genres around a central question concerning women as agents of change and continuity in the wild west.

Format: *Your final paper should include the following:*

- *a title page with the title of your paper and your name,*

- an introduction or preface orienting the reader to the central question your paper will explore,
- a series of 3 pieces in at least 3 different genres,
- a conclusion / epilogue / “dear reader” letter (minimum 3 double-spaced pages) tying your pieces together and explaining what these pieces reveal about your central question, and
- an annotated bibliography of at least 8 sources, in MLA format, with a brief description about how each source was used in exploring your central question. At least 5 of these sources should be assigned course readings.

Process: We will work on this multigenre paper in stages. I am available to brainstorm this paper with you, or provide feedback, in person or on-line. You are encouraged to travel outside of your comfort zone, and to give your imagination free rein, as you explore your central question. You are also encouraged to use DU’s Writing and Research Centers; links to each have been posted on Blackboard under Websites.

Voice & Audience: You may write in your own voice, the voice of character(s) we have encountered in literature, and/or you may create your own character(s). You will be writing to share what you have learned, and to educate, your classmates about your central issue.

Genres: You may use any combination of, and are not limited to, the following genres:

- Yarn, tale, parable, fable or story
- Editorials or letters to the editor
- Travelogue or travel guide
- Advice column

- Sketch or portrait
- Obituary or eulogy
- Conversation or dialogue
- Dramatic scene or script
- Poem or ballad
- Journal entry
- Monologue
- Memoir or Autobiography
- Tabloid newspaper articles
- Interviews by a reporter or talk show host
- Book or film review
- Short video or photo essay
- Recipe
- Postcard
- Travel Poster
- Collage
- Advertisement
- Wanted Poster
- Memo or letter
- Top Ten List
- Resume
- Satiric piece or parody
- Petition
- Transcript of a court hearing

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Criteria for evaluation: Your grade for this paper will be based upon how well you achieve the following goals:

- Clear illustration and exploration of one central question

- *Thoughtful combination of a variety of genres to illuminate your central question*
- *Consideration of alternative narratives, visions or voices of women in the wild west*
- *Placement of the pieces within your paper in a way that creates a dialogue or conversation between the pieces*
- *Creative effort*
- *Effective framing of the different genre pieces by an introduction/prologue and a conclusion/epilogue / "dear reader" letter*
- *Communication of a conclusion or thesis addressing your central question*
- *Demonstration of critical engagement with the assigned readings*
- *Clarity of expression*
- *Care in polishing and proofreading your paper*
- *Use of appropriate MLA format in your annotated bibliography*

Creative dialogue lies at the heart of the multigenre process. The juxtaposition of the different readings I have constructed for the students will demonstrate how such a dialogue can be arranged. Ideally, the students' creative responses will arise from the internal dialogue generated within the students' reading journals as they engage these assigned readings, as well as from the discussions which occur in the classroom and on-line via Blackboard. Ultimately, each student must not only consider how her creative pieces speak to each other within the context of her individual multigenre project, but how these pieces fit into our ongoing class dialogue about the assigned readings.

In reaching the end of this reflection on the multigenre writing I plan to use in my core course, I am left with even more questions to be explored. How will the students engage with the readings I have selected? How will they use their journals to explore these readings? What will the students learn from creating their own multigenre projects? How effective will the scaffolding assignments and exercises be in helping them to understand the essential elements of a multigenre project? How will the students use the feedback they receive from me and from

their peers in revising their work? What role can a multigenre project play in a diverse learning community? Can a multigenre project equally engage and educate students with diverse abilities, backgrounds and interests?

As I explore this multigenre process with my students, I will continue to reflect on our progress and consider these questions. And so the dialogue continues.

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