

A Multigenre Approach to Early American Literature Instruction in the
College Classroom

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In an essay collected in *Teaching the Literatures of Early America*, Russell Reising applauds the increasing number of works by early American writers that publishers have made accessible to instructors in recent years. Indeed, the distinguished Americanist is pleased to report that "the proliferation of affordable editions of early novels, travel writings, captivity narratives, poetry, and theological tracts provides a rich variety of primary materials available for classroom use" (259). Early American literature scholars and teachers who have incorporated a greater variety of narratives into their courses—including those by Native Americans, underrepresented colonial groups, African Americans, and women—report being energized by the opportunity to confront "the complexities of early materials" (Mulford 1). Many of these practitioners have urged others in the field to do likewise.¹

According to a number of early Americanists, students also stand to benefit from the growth in the availability of American writings to the early 1800s. James Ruppert points out, for example, that incorporating now widely available Native American oral narratives and additional Native American authors into early American literature course syllabi enhances students' understanding of North American Native cultures (24). In addition, Ruppert claims that such inclusions help students develop an awareness of the history of indigenous encounters with European

¹ For a whole range of analyses pertaining to the expansion and diversification of American and early American literature course readings, see *Teaching the Literatures of Early America*.

colonizers as well as an appreciation for the complexity and multiformity of early American writings (11, 24).

As someone who specializes in this area, I, like Reising and Ruppert, welcome these developments and view them as an indicator of the field's vitality. However, when considered from a pedagogical standpoint, this trend underscores not only the opportunities but also the challenges that confront those of us who are passionate about teaching this material effectively. Reising would appear to agree. With a view to balancing the old with the new, Reising offers an example of how one might place conventional Puritan readings in dialogue "with many other voices and emergent traditions—antinomian, Native American, Quaker, Anglican, atheist, Deist, and others" (260). To help students appreciate the Puritan contribution to such a cross-cultural exchange, Reising emphasizes the importance of providing them with the requisite historical and theological background. For example, Reising recommends that students be introduced to the basic tenets of Calvinism, including material relating to the Synod of Dort (260). This early seventeenth-century assembly of the Dutch Reformed Church codified five essential points of belief. According to Reising, students can more easily digest these intellectually demanding theological concepts when they are presented in the form of the tried-and-true acronym, TULIP, which stands for T-otal depravity, U-nconditional salvation, L-imited election, I-rresistible grace, and P-erseverance of the saints.²

In those instances when I think it might prove useful, I too have drawn my student's attention to this and other mnemonic devices. Such memory aids can improve students' recall of the abstruse and otherwise forgettable political, historical, and theological contexts with which they need to be familiar to comprehend the richness of a particular narrative. However, it should not come as a surprise to anyone teaching this subject

² For Reising's elaboration on the meanings of these interrelated tenets, see "The Early American Literature Survey" (261).

that relying on a bag of mnemonic tricks will hardly suffice to ignite a passion for seventeenth-century Puritan conversion narratives or eighteenth-century polemics. On the contrary, the seeming necessity of cues like these only serves to confirm most undergraduates' preconceptions about early American literature. Prior to *The Last of the Mohicans* (1826), many students still believe, American literature is really just a dusty stack of sermons, tedious travel journals, old letters, and a few obscure novels that we in academe are attempting to pass off as the "truly literary." So how do we get students to give historically remote and therefore intimidating material like this a chance?

Clearly there is more than one answer to this question. But the most effective solutions are likely to incorporate a pedagogical framework that promotes connections between the evermore comprehensive canon of early American literature we are eager to teach, on the one hand, and the twenty-first century lives of the students we serve, on the other. As a result of my ongoing efforts to encourage this nexus, I discovered that one of the more promising approaches is multigenre writing. According to Tom Romano, a pioneer of this alternative to the conventional academic essay, the 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). In its response to a literary text or some other object of investigation, the multigenre paper is produced using a number of artistic genres, such as poetry, fictional prose, playwriting, screenwriting, journalism, advertising, and the visual arts. When used as an investigative tool in the context of a wide range of disciplines, these imaginative genres have been shown to promote student engagement in learning. For instance, in the *English Journal*—an English language arts journal for high school, junior high, and middle school educators—Christian Knoeller argues that the multigenre technique of text interpretation "offer[s] a number of important advantages" when compared to conventional analytical writing

assignments, including "engaging and motivating students through variety and choice" (47). According to Knoeller, students respond to this approach by "read[ing] and reread[ing] literary works with a heightened degree of scrutiny. They acknowledge that imaginative response is often as complex and challenging as conventional analysis—if not more so" (48).

Nevertheless, the literature search I conducted left me uncertain as to whether or not such a pedagogical method would be appropriate for college literature students. There is a substantial body of scholarship dedicated to various facets of the multigenre approach to writing. But much of it is focused on secondary school education. Books and scholarly articles with titles such as Camille Allen's *The Multigenre Research Paper: Voice, Passion, and Discovery in Grades 4-6* and Blasingame and Bushman's essay, "The Multi-Genre Approach in Writing," which recently appeared in *Teaching Writing in Middle and Secondary Schools*, are typical. Less abundant is research on multigenre writing and the college composition classroom such as Davis and Shadle's essay, "'Building a Mystery': Alternative Research Writing and the Academic Act of Seeking," which appeared in *College Composition and Communication*. And studies focusing on the challenges unique to the college literature classroom are surprisingly scarce.

Despite the dearth of relevant research, I decided to give it a try. A number of the classes I teach at California State University, Stanislaus—a mid-sized school with a diverse population of students in the San Joaquin Valley—would have offered suitable laboratories for this multigenre experiment. After careful consideration, I selected my American Literature to 1865 course because it exposes inexperienced undergraduates to sometimes intimidating seventeenth-, eighteenth-, and nineteenth-century treatises, sermons, spiritual autobiographies, journals, and letters translated into and/or written in English. The hypothesis that I wished to either confirm or disprove was whether or not the multigenre approach to literary study would encourage student engagement. Applying Elizabeth F.

Barkley's formulation, I define student engagement as "the product of motivation *and* active learning" (6). According to Barkley, "motivation" describes "the feeling of interest or enthusiasm that makes somebody want to" learn (17). On the other hand, "active learning" denotes the "dynamic" process whereby "students make information or a concept their own by connecting it to their existing knowledge and experience" and, thereby, engage in "deep learning that lasts" (Barkley 17). For Barkley, "self-questioning and analyzing," as well as comparing and "relat[ing]" new ideas to old" are vital components of the process of new knowledge acquisition designated by active learning (17). Moreover, according to Barkley, the "interaction" between motivation and active learning can be intensely "synergistic"—interest in an object of study intensifies a learner's focus and willingness to put forth effort, which, in turn, enkindles her enthusiasm.

Setting up my experiment was my next step. I directed my students to select from a variety of possible genres in order to engage a question, issue, or conflict in a recently assigned reading in the *Heath Anthology of American Literature*, the primary text for this class. No matter which narrative they selected, I encouraged my students to take advantage of the opportunity to reframe that question or issue by telling the story from perspectives other than the narrator's. In addition, I required them to choose at least three of the following genre forms: a letter, a diary entry, a poem, a newspaper account (of the event, incident, or controversy that focused their paper), an interview between two or more parties, an advertisement, a collage, a eulogy, or an obituary.

To clarify what I had in mind, I offered my students examples of possible multigenre projects. I explained, for instance, that they could describe Father Isaac Jogues's capture by the Mohawk Indians in New France related in Lalemant's *Jesuit Relation* from the perspective of one of the missionary's abductors. I also suggested to my students that they could compose a stanza of one of the Navarrete poems that inspired

Juana Inés de la Cruz's Spanish ballad, "In Reply to a Gentleman from Peru, Who Sent Her Clay Vessels While Suggesting She Would Better Be a Man." Or they might consider writing an "as told by" version of Mary Rowlandson's captivity narrative from the vantage of one of her Nipmuc, Pokanoket, or Narragansett captors.

Before my students submitted their work (especially during the first semester that I conducted this experiment), I was concerned that many of them might have decided this assignment lacked the requisite gravitas. After all, "literature," a number of my students have volunteered over the years, is supposed to be enriching because, at its best, it is so "deep," so "heavy"—in other words, so serious. I was pleased to discover that my concerns in this regard were mostly unfounded. Indeed, during both of the semesters in which I included the multigenre project, my American literature to 1865 students generated results that exceeded my expectations. These two creative classes produced projects that included translated letters from Pocahontas to the legendary Captain John Smith. In reading some of these epistles, I learned that the Powhatan teen expresses her undying love for the swashbuckling English captain. In others, I learned that the Indian maiden felt compelled to apologize for pretending to have romantic feelings for Smith. Her actual motivation for saving him, I found out after reading one missive, was to fulfill her role in an Algonquin adoption ritual. I also received both love letters and spiteful commemorations written as if they were by Deborah Read to her often-absent common-law husband, Benjamin Franklin. On one tombstone epitaph signed "Miss Read," a student wrote, "For decades of time I have silently / yearned for this self-absorbed / individual. But in his death there is no hope of reform. Thus, I will / have the last word —Good Riddance / Mr. Benjamin Franklin." Another student allowed me to lay eyes on a diary entry from Sally Hemings—Thomas Jefferson's slave and reputed mulatto concubine—in which she ponders his private attitude towards miscegenation:

We share all that a man and a woman can share. This spring brings another new one [baby]. Master Jefferson—my Thom—I wonder who I am in your eyes.... I do not look like the others. But then I do not look like you either. After all this time have you found it in your heart and mind to see me differently? When you look at me do you see a lower quality woman?

Other students submitted vituperative editorials from Southern newspapers on abolition speeches delivered by Frederick Douglass. In addition, these two groups of students produced posters, collages, paintings, and sculptures.

As one component of the assessment of this multigenre project, I asked the students to engage in a critical reflection on their experience. This self-assessment took the form of an in-class writing assignment consisting of three questions: (1) "What, if any, unifying theme or themes appear to be shared by all of your genre forms?" (2) "What, if anything," have "you learned from this multigenre task?" (3) And "What are this multigenre assignment's strengths and weaknesses when compared to the short essay as a learning experience?" I believe it was especially important to ask my students to consider whether or not their projects might be unified thematically. This question was essential, in my view, because it would require them to engage in an analysis of the similarities and differences between their genre forms. The assignment did have a thematic element built into it—in the form of the narrative or "story" that was to be told from different points of view. However, I was concerned that without such a question my students might not automatically understand the significances of their various genre and alternative character perspective choices. As Romano has observed, "Multigenre papers can be quite a cognitive load. Because they can be so demanding to read" and write (149). Therefore, Romano believes that instructors ought to "nudge students to provide recurring images, echoes of language, and repetition of form that reverberate among genres" (149). David LeNoir stresses the

necessity for unity in multigenre assignments even more emphatically. According to LeNoir, "In simple terms, a multigenre work without unity is not a multigenre paper; it is an anthology at best—and, more likely than not, merely the written equivalent of Fibber McGee's closet, an assortment of unrelated material precariously assembled" (100).

A small group of students in both surveys expressed doubts that this multigenre assignment lent itself to significant unity—especially when compared to the traditional thesis-driven short essay they had completed prior to this project. However, most of the students in both classes discovered that their multigenre assignments were thematically unified in various ways. Alida, one of my students in the first of these two American literature surveys, responded to this question in a way that was typical.³ She employed poetic and epistolary genres to explore one of a number of the accounts of the Abenaki Indian captivity of Hannah Dustan, a seventeenth-century New England woman. According to Alida, "the theme that was common throughout my genres was the underlying emotion that is not told from simply reading the narrative. I dived deep into the emotions of Dustan, and those who had a connection with her experience. I told her story & linked it through fear, disappointment, reality, and social misconceptions." Alida's use here of a diving metaphor ("dived deep into the emotions of Dustan") to describe her experience is unique. But her realization that emotion integrated the components of her genre project was not. Indeed, it was a response shared by many of her classmates.

Considered as an assessment reflective of a number of others, Alida's answer demonstrates how the multigenre approach can be tailored to motivate students to develop emotional connections to unfamiliar narratives. The affective link Alida discusses in her reflection likely stems from her own knowledge—generative of emotions such as "fear, disappointment" that she has experienced as a young woman growing up

³ The names of all of the students to whom I refer in this essay, including "Alida," have been changed to protect their privacy.

and living in twenty-first century America. More importantly, those emotive links, once established, help to foster an analytical engagement with early American narratives. The combination of the higher-order cognitive processing and the affective engagement reported by students such as Alida is also synergistic. Indeed, according to Barkley, "Tapping into students' emotions can inspire them to put forth their greatest effort" and thus "increases the likelihood that they will learn more deeply" (Barkley 35).

Students in both my first and second semester classes tended to answer the second and third questions of the critical reflection prompt as if they were roughly the same. As was the case in their answers to the first question, the majority of students in both classes responded positively to the two questions I mentioned previously—"What, if anything, have you learned from this multigenre writing task?" and "What were this multigenre assignment's strengths and weaknesses when compared to the short essay as a learning experience?" Of the thirty students who completed the assignment during the fall semester, twenty-six described their experiences in positive terms. During the spring semester, thirty-five of the thirty-eight participants recorded similarly positive experiences. By "positive," I mean the students reported that they thought this assignment enhanced their understanding of the narratives on which they chose to focus. While a few students during each of the semesters maintained that they both preferred the thesis-driven essay and insisted that it compelled them to engage in a more effective form of active learning (three in the first and four in the second), the majority did not. Even most of those students who admitted to feeling "anxious," "scared," or "confused" because they believed their project would fail to be adequately "artistic" or "creative," ultimately decided that they had learned things the thesis-driven assignment had not or could not teach them.⁴ Many of my students

⁴ When I introduced the assignment, I emphasized that it was experimental and that the stakes were low. But I also wanted my students to take it seriously. Therefore, I made the

used phrases such as "exciting," "fun," "fresh," "freeing," and "thinking outside of the box" to describe their experiences with this task.

Alejandra, a student in my second semester class, recorded a response that was representative of a number of these positive critical reflections. The engagement represented by Alejandra's response to this multigenre assignment differed from participants like Alida, who were primarily motivated by the opportunity it offered them to establish an emotional connection to the literature. Indeed, Alejandra reports that the assignment stimulated her to engage in sustained analyses that produced new knowledge. The project she undertook also encouraged her to examine the process by which she acquired the information she obtained. Like several of her classmates, Alejandra selected Crèvecoeur's *Letters from an American Farmer* (1782). Those familiar with this late eighteenth-century epistolary narrative will recall that it portrays the growing disillusionment of James, the initially optimistic yeoman narrator, with the democratic virtues of Enlightenment America. Alejandra focused her project on Letter IX, "A Description of Charles-town." In this letter, James describes a gruesome encounter while on his way to dine with a local planter. As he is traveling to his guest's house on foot, James reveals that he is shocked to discover a severely wounded "Negro [slave]," whose eyes have been "picked out" of their sockets by birds and who is "suspended in [a] cage" where he has been left to die. Although initially horrified, James manages to continue on to the planter's home, where he learns that the slave is being punished for killing the plantation's "overseer" (Crèvecoeur 179).

In the process of describing the significance of the three genres she selected—a slave's journal entry, a pro-slavery newspaper article, and a

project worth five percent of their final grade. And while creative genre use was rewarded, those students who weren't satisfied with their grades had the option of replacing it with the mark they received subsequently on a short essay of equivalent value.

collage—Alejandra explains first that she "wanted to take this topic and look at it through different angles." The article Alejandra produced offers a particularly instructive example of the comparative analysis this multigenre assignment yielded. In contrast to the compassion the diary entry inspires for the slave, according to Alejandra, the purpose of the pro-slavery newspaper article is to illustrate how it "dehumanizes the Negro [slave] by glorifying the overseer as never having hurt another human being." The newspaper item works to build sympathy for the victim of the slave's ostensible crime. He is described by the author as a "kind man, one who would never hurt another human being." Meanwhile, the description of the murder lingers over the gruesome details meant to horrify the Southern white readership of the paper. She calls her paper "The New American Times," the headline of which is printed in a crude, old-time typeface. We read that the overseer was "brutally assaulted and murdered" and that "he was discovered in a pool of his own blood by a servant girl in the house."

After contemplating her options, Alejandra determined that the juxtaposition of the three genres she chose, especially the journal entry and the newspaper article, would most forcefully reveal what she refers to as "the irony that exists from the different perspectives" of this late eighteenth-century slave culture. She lets it be known that this genre kept her on her toes: "I had to use my wits of sarcasm to show the misguided mindset of this class of white man." She built on her existing knowledge of this Crèvecoeurian epistle by using her personal reaction to these events to inhabit the perspectives of the negro slave, his African slave community, and the pro-slavery newspaper. Regarding the slave's diary, for example, Alejandra remarks, "I tried to imagine his feelings and actions.... I tried to put myself in his place and understand his emotions."

Alejandra sums up her multigenre learning experience by elaborating on the new knowledge she gained as a result of connecting it to her experience with writing the traditional thesis-driven essay she had completed previously during the semester. While both assignments

provided her with an opportunity to analyze literature, the multigenre project gave her "a chance to think critically" while allowing "for creativity." She emphasizes that it gave her an opportunity "to get more in the mindset of this time." Such a reflective awareness is consistent with active learning. Students such as Alejandra "are dynamic participants in their learning" precisely because "they are reflecting on and monitoring both the processes and the results of their learning" (Barkley 17). This grouping of genres made it possible for her to use her imagination to enter into the seemingly distant experiences of these characters and "ultimately" to better "understand the perspectives" of its early republican readers. The critical reflection in which those like Alejandra absorbed themselves also tended to generate enthusiasm for the subject. Near the end of her reflection on her multigenre project, for example, Alejandra remarks, "I really enjoyed this assignment." In its synergistic interaction with active learning, this enjoyment inspired her to intensify her effort to deepen her appreciation of "the perspectives of that" late-eighteenth-century "time." In short, Alejandra's assessment of her multigenre project offers ample evidence of the high degree to which the process motivated her, and other like-minded students, to engage in active learning.

As I look back on my generation, execution, and assessment of this multigenre experiment, I believe it has confirmed that this an effective approach with which to study early American literature—and perhaps other historically remote literary periods. In both semesters during which I conducted this experiment, students reported that they believed it gave them another set of tools with which to engage in a critical exploration of these writings. Using multiple genres, many of my students insisted, encouraged them to view history and literature from a number of perspectives, to bridge the historical gap they once thought separated them from the cultures and literatures of the distant past. This project served to reawaken my students' natural curiosity about the lives of those they were drawn to research. The connection these students felt as a

result of this active learning process also served to improve their recall of the knowledge they acquired.

During these two semesters, I also witnessed the ways in which, as Jung asserts, "the multigenre text" is "an example of an inherently disruptive and therefore potentially revisionary written form" (xiii). "By refusing to 'fit in' to the conventions of any one genre or subfield, and yet by building alliances with several different genres at once," Jung contends, "multigenre texts demand new and better kinds of listening (xiii). Such an alternative form of listening seems to be what a student from my second semester survey, Natasha, is referring to when she comments,

This assignment gave me a chance to look past the 'rhetorical elements' used in the literature and I was able to delve more into the characters in the piece. I was able to envision them as live beings and put meaning behind the story. It allowed me to focus more on the actual story and hypothesize how and why the events occurred.

Consistent with the active learning described by a number of the other multigenre project participants, Natasha concludes her critical reflection with the observation that "this assignment allowed for creativity while analyzing the story." Might a statement like "I was able...to put meaning behind the story" suggest that students like Natasha run the risk of playing fast and loose with what actually happened to a particular character or a historical figure in a narrative? Perhaps. But the enthusiasm she conveys in her response to her multigenre project could also indicate the opposite. In their desire to connect with their characters, to "envision them as live beings," students such as Natasha might also care enough to produce a more painstaking exploration of the motivation for a character's development. As a result, Natasha, and those similar to her, may likewise be inspired to engage in more rigorous analyses of the choices that combine to produce a given narrative's structure and significance. I, for one, believe that such a learning reward is worth the risk.

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