

# “It would be fun to do again”: Multigenre responses to literature

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**These seventh graders created a multigenre project to deepen their understanding of a text and improve their critical thinking skills.**

**Copies of *A Single Shard*** by Linda Sue Park (2001) sat on my bookshelf, and I was debating how to integrate reading, writing, and talking about the novel. I considered having my seventh graders write informal responses in reading journals and discuss them in class, but we had already done that. Another possibility was to write traditional analytical essays, but that didn't even spark my enthusiasm.

In the meantime, I read *Blending Genre, Altering Style* by Tom Romano (2000). At the independent suburban Maryland school where I teach in the United States, I am encouraged to develop my own curriculum, so I decided to try Romano's idea for writing multigenre papers, a collection 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. In addition to many genres, a multigenre paper may also contain many voices, not just the author's. (p. x)

My decision to use Romano's approach was reinforced by the words in an article by Christian

Knoeller (2003), “Writing imaginatively readily complements other forms of creativity in the literature classroom and can enrich how we teach literature, eliciting genuinely original student writing in place of expository papers that are too often similar—and limited—in form and focus” (p. 44). By giving students an opportunity to respond to *A Single Shard* (Park, 2001) through various genres, I hoped they would engage with the text and think deeply about the novel. And that is just what happened.

*A Single Shard* (Park, 2001), winner of the 2002 Newbery Medal, is a story about Tree-ear, an orphan boy who lives with a homeless man, Crane-man, in a 12th-century Korean village. Tree-ear becomes an assistant to a master potter, Min, who makes fine celadon ware. Tree-ear is sent to the King's Court to show Min's pottery, and the difficult, dangerous journey changes his life. Although other middle school teachers and I loved the book, to my disappointment most of the students did not. However, they were intrigued by the multigenre approach, and their interest increased as they composed creative pieces that reflected their understanding of the novel.

As Christensen (2000) commented, one goal of a teacher is to move students from “perfunctory ‘for-the-teacher writing’ to committed writing” (p. 163). The multigenre approach did just that. Students thought about what genres appealed to them and suited their purposes. What they wrote was insightful, imaginative, and sometimes playful,

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turning what might have been a tedious literature unit into one that was fun. In addition, their writing fulfilled Standard 3 in the International Reading Association/National Council of Teachers of English (IRA/NCTE) *Standards for the English Language Arts* (1996): "Students apply a wide range of strategies to comprehend, interpret, evaluate, and appreciate texts" (p. 31).

## Modeling multigenre writing

Teachers recognize that models are invaluable tools, and Romano (2000) encouraged us to use samples to inform and motivate students. I had never done a multigenre unit and did not have any student samples, so I wrote my own based on *The Pigman* (Zindel, 1968/1986), a book that the class had read earlier in the year. Doing the assignment myself was invaluable. As Jester (2003) said,

As a teacher of writing, I consider writing to be one of the most important things I can do for my kids. I need to put myself in their place on a continual basis so that I more fully understand what I am asking them to do. (p. 13)

I already had one piece to jump-start my multigenre collection. For our school's newsletter, I had written an article about problems faced by adolescents in *The Pigman* (Zindel, 1968/1986). With little difficulty (and much delight), I composed other pieces to add to my multigenre booklet. For instance, I put myself in the shoes of Lorraine, one of the protagonists, and wrote a letter to Mr. Pignati, the Pigman. Next, because some of the language in *The Pigman* is dated, I did a little research and wrote a brief essay about slang terms in the 1960s. Another multigenre piece was an imaginary "report" from a high school counselor to the parents of a character in the book who had been misbehaving. I also wrote a reflection for each piece of writing, which explained what I wrote and why I wrote it.

I distributed copies of my multigenre booklet to share with my students. As we read it, I discussed with them roadblocks that I encountered as I composed pieces and answered their questions about how to proceed, which they found helpful.

## How many genres are there, anyway?

As Romano (2000) said, he wants students to immerse themselves, "to travel the territory of a concept, to get to know its geography" (p. 43). The multigenre project promoted this in two ways: Students needed to think deeply about the novel, and they needed to understand what each genre entailed. To facilitate success, before anyone started writing, the class brainstormed ideas for different genres, starting with the ones I had used in my booklet on *The Pigman* (Zindel, 1968/1986). Students enthusiastically generated ideas that I had never considered, such as a suicide note. (This genre suited the novel perfectly, for at one point in the story, Tree-ear considered jumping off a cliff.) Although we ended up with a list of 47 different genres, as students worked on the project, they thought of even more. (See Table 1 for a final list of genres. I have alphabetized them for easy reference.)

To ensure that students experimented with many types of writing, they were required to write at least 10 pieces in at least 7 different genres. In addition, they wrote a reflection about each piece, explaining how they came up with their idea and how the piece connected to the novel. In their reflections, many also commented on how much fun they had or how pleased they were with each piece of writing.

One thing I regret is that I did not devote more class time to discussing genres on the students' lists. It was not until after I read first drafts that I realized that students did not know the difference between an obituary and a death notice. This was easily remedied by looking at samples

**Table 1**  
**Ideas for multigenre pieces**

Advertisement	Description	Interview	Recipe
Advice column	Dialogue/conversation	Lesson plan	Résumé
Alternate ending	Diary/journal	Letter	Schedule
Announcement	Dictionary	Map with legend	School report/evaluation
Autobiography	Directions	Memorandum	Science fiction
Bill	Editorial	Monologue	Song/rap
Biography	Epilogue	News article	Study guide
Book jacket	Essay	Obituary	Suicide note
Book review	Fable	Persuasive essay	Summary
Book talk	Fantasy	Play	Talk show transcript
Business letter	Game with instructions	Poem (variety of different styles)	Television newscaster report
Catalogue	Greeting card	Poster	Travel guide
Character analysis	Guidebook	Prayer	Warning
Comic strip	Historical fiction	Prediction	Word find
Crossword puzzle	How-to (process) composition	Quiz/test	Workbook
Death notice	Hymn	Ransom note	

from newspapers, which illustrated how the two differed. However, I was sorry that students did not have sufficient information to meet success on their first drafts. Also, although the list of choices was extensive, it might have been beneficial to introduce additional genres, such as compare-contrast essays and epitaphs.

## Getting started

At the beginning of *A Single Shard* (Park, 2001), the author explains how Tree-ear and Crane-man got their names. After we read that part of the story, students wrote short essays about the history of their own names. Because I did not want the size of the multigenre project to overwhelm them, I suggested that they could use their name essays in their multigenre booklets, but only one girl did. I think this indicated that students preferred to choose for themselves rather than write what I imposed on them. Actually, this pleased me. Like Christensen (2000), I did not want stu-

dents simply to "mimic" a prompt. My preference was to have them "find their passion" and write about it (p. 164), and the multigenre approach encouraged this.

## Write about what you care about

I was concerned that students would not challenge themselves and would write short pieces just to finish quickly, but they did not. One boy designed a map of Ch'ulp'o, the village where the story takes place. In his reflection, he conveyed the importance of rereading the text to ensure accuracy:

This was the first piece of work that I did and, as you can see, I put a great deal of effort into it. I looked in the book to find all accounts of the town's layout, and I transformed the descriptions into pictures. For a few items, I ended up having to make up their location, due to the fact that the location was not mentioned in the book. This was probably my most creative piece.

As stated in *Standards for the English Language Arts* (IRA/NCTE, 1996),

Nonprint texts are also an essential part of students' reading experience.... Graphic and visual messages influence contemporary society powerfully, and students need to learn how the elements of visual language communicate ideas and shape thought and action. (p. 28)

Drawing a map provided an opportunity for this boy to create a visual text.

Students were truly invested in their writing. Many wrote editorials, journal entries, monologues, and so on, about events in the novel that posed moral dilemmas. One girl never did reach a firm decision as she debated the pros and cons of "regifting," which occurred in the story. Another student wrote an essay about whether Tree-ear, who spied on Min's competitor, Kang, should tell his master about the pots that Kang was making. The student's final comment was, "In the end, what seems right does not always turn out to be right. Making the distinction between right and wrong can often be hard."

The Internet was a wonderful source of information. One day a boy brought a crossword puzzle to class. His classmates were enticed by his choice of genres. Initially I worried that the multigenre project had deteriorated into triviality, but I discovered that students were reviewing vocabulary by incorporating new words into their puzzles, and they were teaching one another to use the computer in new ways. (There's a great website called <http://puzzlemaker.school.discovery.com> that helps design word finds and crossword puzzles.) By making up word games, they were also reading the text for details (in order to stump their classmates), and their friends were eager to play.

Another girl consulted the Internet to make a letter from Tree-ear to Min sound authentic. In her reflection, she wrote,

I decided to write a letter because I thought that Tree-ear might want to write to Min when he became an adult. In this letter I talk about Tree-ear becoming a potter. I decided to tell the names of his kids so I went to [websites] with popular Korean names [<http://www.usfca.edu/~boucherj/namepage.html> and [www.geocities.com/weadopt2001/knames.html](http://www.geocities.com/weadopt2001/knames.html)]. While I was writing this letter, I could almost vision [sic] Min's response to it.

Learning languages appealed to another girl, so she looked up the Korean alphabet on the Internet at <http://thinkzone.wlonk.com/Language/Korean.htm> and made the following discovery: "After looking at Korean letters I noticed that there aren't very many and it's very different than Chinese, where there are very many symbols. This was a fun, and educational genre, it would be fun to do again."

Some students wrote advertisements or certificates. One boy delighted in explaining how he formatted his work:

The Royal Commission certificate was a fun project to do. I like to use Print Shop Ensemble III as my graphics program because it can do almost every type of print document I can think of. The process to make the finished piece is very easy: You select what kind of project you want to do. Then you choose the backdrop for the project. Next you choose the format of the document. And finally you choose the images and text you want to use. When I choose the images I want to put in, I consider, would this image supplement the main idea of the project? It is only four steps until you finish. It is truly my favorite way to make a homework assignment.

In this situation, the student met Standard 8 from the *Standards for the English Language Arts* (IRA/NCTE, 1996) by using a computer "to gather and synthesize information and to create and communicate knowledge" (p. 39). Although the certificate may have required less in-depth thought than writing a character analysis, it gave the student "the enjoyment and pride of...being his teacher's teacher" (p. 40), and the certificate had the potential for making "a story more vivid for other readers" (p. 34).

Sometimes the multigenre writing was personal. For instance, one boy wrote a narrative about a scooter accident that reminded him of the injury Tree-ear had when he was chopping wood. In his reflection, he noted similarities in the two incidents: "Tree-ear's wound was covered in a piece of cloth like mine, and it took a long time to heal just like mine."

Another student wrote an obituary for Crane-man. In his reflection, he noted,

I thought it was really sad when Crane-man died so I decided to write an obituary. This obituary reminded me of when my great-grandmother died. They had a big obituary written up for her because she was 109. I added a quote that I made up because in my great-grandmother's obituary it had a quote that my grandma said.

I thought that the students might get silly when writing suicide notes, but they did not. Consider the following:

As I lay upon this elevated rock, I write this to whoever finds this. This is where so many human souls made an honorable decision to die of their own will rather than be tortured by their pursuers. I have been robbed of Min's master pottery and I have realized, why be punished for a crime that is not my fault?

There are only two people in this world that I care about and that I pray for in my eternal sleep. Those two are Crane-man and Ajima [Min's wife]. They showed me kindness when I was so weak. They have guided me into this world, but I have failed them. I wish that they could forgive me, but I realize that there should be no forgiveness for it was my fault that I let the pots fall into the hands of evil. As Min's beloved pottery falls to its demise, so do I. Some people were not made to be in this harsh world. I suspect I am one of them.

In his reflection, the student author wrote,

This genre was my favorite one of all. This suicide note was remorseful and it gives another perspective to the reader. It makes you think, why didn't he [Tree-ear] just commit suicide and not have to deal with everyone pitying him? I thought this genre was a very interesting idea and I'm glad that someone thought of it in class.

## Branching off

In *Blending Genre, Altering Style*, Romano (2000) described "branching off" (p. 110) into disciplines other than writing. This happened spontaneously in my classroom. A couple of girls like to sing, and without a second thought they composed songs and entertained everyone by singing the lyrics of their original pieces. A Korean student wrote a recipe for kimchi, told its history, and excitedly shared his native cuisine with the class. A girl who had learned how to use PowerPoint earlier in the year made pictorial slides to accompany her book talk about the author and the novel. Still another compiled a fictitious catalogue titled *Celadon World*, featuring pictures, descriptions, and prices of pots that supposedly had been buried in Korea and were recently found intact.

## Providing help through minilessons

As the class composed multigenre pieces, I taught minilessons to help them with mechanics. For example, I discovered that many students were writing stories with dialogue, so we studied punctuation of conversation. Another lesson focused on formatting plays. One day we reviewed the syllabication pattern for haiku, which led to a lesson on sijo, a type of Korean poetry. (For more information about sijo, see <http://theWORDshop.tripod.com/Sijo/sijo-index.htm>.)

Many students wrote multiple-choice tests about the novel. Composing questions was a good way for them to learn test-taking skills. Constructing a test was challenging: They were held accountable for writing clear, complete directions, and, of course, an answer key. One minilesson focused on writing item stems and four possible answers. This provided a perfect opportunity to point out that all of the answer choices needed to be parallel in form (e.g., all might start with an infinitive). I also reminded everyone to use *a* or *an* in the stem before a list of words.

Students quickly discovered that it was not easy to construct a test.

## Compiling multigenre booklets

To help students budget their time and to enable me to provide guidance, I set intermediate deadlines when students shared what they had written. This had dual benefits: Classmates were exposed to different genres, and peers provided feedback to help others improve their writing. Once everything was written, students numbered their pages, wrote a table of contents, and made a cover. Assembling a booklet gave them an opportunity to integrate their individual pieces of writing. Many put all of the reflections at the end of the booklet because they did not want to interrupt the flow of their creative pieces, whereas others alternated multigenre pieces with reflections because they wanted to ensure that the reader got a clear explanation of the author's intent.

Putting together a booklet finalized the activity. Many students added illustrations to make their covers aesthetically attractive. Although some students wrote pieces that did not require as much critical thinking as others, that is expected in a heterogeneously grouped class. A few did not write 10 reflections, making it difficult for readers to understand their thought processes, but everyone published a collection of 10 pieces.

## Evaluating the activity

Writing in various genres and sharing with one another enabled students to "deepen their knowledge not only of themselves but also of the world" and "to build an understanding of the many dimensions (e.g., philosophical, ethical, aesthetic) of human experience" (IRA/NCTE, 1996, p. 29). Because I was concerned, however, that 10 different pieces and 10 reflections might have been too ambitious, I asked for student feedback.

As I expected, a few stated that there was too much writing, but the majority indicated that the

amount was reasonable, which was reassuring. Some even suggested giving extra credit for writing more than 10 pieces. A couple of students recommended that if they wrote multiple pieces in one genre, such as three poems, they should only have to write one reflection, which seemed reasonable. In general, I think students responded positively because the assignment enabled them to compose pieces that tapped their personal interests and encouraged creativity.

I certainly enjoyed reading their final versions. Most rewarding were the reflective statements that accompanied each piece, for they showed how invested the students were in their writing. For instance, one girl wrote out a daily schedule for Tree-ear. Although schedules can seem rather mundane, her reflection revealed how much thought went into composing hers. She commented,

I wrote this schedule because it shows a part of Tree-ear's eagerness to learn, his generosity toward Crane-man, his energy, and his average day life in Korea in the 12th century. Tree-ear has a rather busy day, between following Min's order, scavenging for food, and helping Crane-man and Ajima with their everyday tasks.

Another student wrote a heartfelt essay about a disturbing custom in 12th-century Korea. In her reflection, she wrote,

I chose to write an essay about Celadon pottery and the cultures and customs surrounding it because when I read that only the sons of potters were taught to throw pots, I was completely astounded. Linda Sue Park captured the way Tree-ear [an orphan] felt perfectly, and I thought it would be terrible to really love doing something or really want to do something but not be able to.

## The value of multigenre responses

I have always liked reading response journals, but multigenre papers went one step further toward

ensuring that students used language to reinforce and solidify their understanding of what they read. Romano (2000) claimed that "some students take readily to multigenre papers; others have difficulty" (p. 56). My experience was that no one was threatened or intimidated; rather, they felt empowered because they chose how to respond to what they read and motivated because they had classmates for an audience.

Overall, the multigenre project took off in directions I never anticipated. In the two weeks that we spent on the activity, students willingly experimented with various genres. Some borrowed ideas from classmates, while others tried something original. They willingly reread parts of the book for clarification. They dug deeply and made connections between their own lives and the text. Their booklets reflected their cognitive and emotional involvement with the book. Writing 10 pieces and reflecting on each was a

huge undertaking, but students accepted the challenge and met much success. And I had the satisfaction of reading imaginative, insightful pieces of writing.

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