Uncovering the Human Truth Across Genres

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Background

"Human existence cannot be silent, nor can it be nourished by false words, but only by true words, with which men and women transform the world."

I teach at an affluent high school in Cornelius, NC, a small but growing suburb built on transplants from the Northeast and the West. While the highly transient population creates some diversity, the high school that I teach at is largely homogenous. My students generally come from families with high expectations for success. For most of the adults in my students' respective worlds, academic success directly led to financial and personal success. And this has set the example that achieving in high school is imperative to succeeding in one's life. Most of the students at my school also have the resources necessary to be successful in the twentieth century – ipads, laptops, and endless opportunities to explore the world around them. This really means that as a teacher, I have few worries about external factors affecting my students' academic success.

Although it is predominantly middle class, my high school is very large – comprising approximately 2,100 students. The impressive size and the transient population of students create a unique form of diversity in my school. Students are from different corners of the country and bring unique experiences to the classroom. On the smaller scale of just my classroom, I see major academic differences between my students; a wide variation can be seen between my Standard English I and Foundations of English classes. A portion of my students have already failed the ninth grade or have failed an English class in the past while another portion of my students are former Honors students. Another sizeable portion of my students is ESL students that are integrating into American culture through the high school experience. As a result, there is still a significant portion of my students that fits into a different demographic than the mainstream.

The demographics of my high school directly influenced me to apply for this seminar and write this unit. As students with generally little perspective about the discrimination of the "system" that they live in and contribute to, a unit focused on the narratives of American struggles would fill in those gaps in perspective. Furthermore, this unit will empower those students that do not fit into the economic or racial norm of the school by turning the focus away from the white male narrative.

Summary of Unit

Because of both the dominant culture at my school and the culture that largely defines my classroom, I am creating a unit that will force my students to read about, and hopefully empathize with, the perspectives of a discriminated group. This will empower students of color while broadening the perspective of my predominantly white population. My unit emphasizes the writing and the perspective of the discriminated, or "voiceless". I chose the New York Times Bestseller *The Help* as a primary text and a variety of other texts such as poetry, short stories, videos, and articles to examine the themes from the primary text. My students will then also consider the importance of context, culture, and biography as they influence an individual's writing voice, style, and choice of content.

After reading *The Help*, we will continue to discuss the ways in which different people tell stories. Again, *The Help* is the primary text by which students will begin their discussion on "truth", story-telling, and perspective. The novel is a work of fiction that includes historical fact from racially tense Deep South in the 1960s, and also incorporates first-hand experience and testimony from the author's childhood in Jackson Mississippi. We will study poetry, paintings, short stories and autobiographies. As we read, students will investigate the techniques that each author uses to portray truth. My goal is for my students to question truth and the importance of the individual's identity in choosing a medium or form for self-expression.

The unit I have included begins with the conclusion of *The Help*. I have included a variety of texts from different genres that express a human "truth" using different form, narrative technique, and perspective. Over the course of the unit, students will work in small groups to analyze these elements in each text. These discussions will scaffold the final product that students will create.

Finally, because my goal is to incorporate the voices of my students, they will be creating a multigenre memoir project that relies on their understanding of perspective and narrative technique in expressing a human "truth" that they have experienced during a personal experience. After consider others' perspectives, students will turn into themselves with a more critical eye and consider how to tell their own story.

Purpose/Rationale

As a student, I spent most of my high school years reading the work of white, American or European men with erudite and abstract ideas about how we should live our lives. As a young, white teenager, I was blissfully unaware of the narrow scope of my eudcation. It was not until college that I began to read literature that included a true variety of voices and contexts. Only then, through my reading of multicultural literature, did I develop an awareness of my position and role in society. Developing this awareness was the focus of the English professors that I worked with during college. To develop this, my professors made multicultural perspectives their central focus in the classroom.

I entered high school again six years later as a teacher, and somehow I was surprised to find that things had not changed much. Students are still reading texts from the perspective of the dominant group, which at my school is the white, middle-class, suburban demographic. Multicultural texts are mostly reserved for classes that specialize in that genre. Of course the classic high school canon should not be excluded when exploring life's big questions and universal themes as it considers a certain perspective and voice. But while the original high school canon should be taught, why should students wait until college to experience the entire scope of human truth?

For students of all backgrounds, the time is now for multicultural texts. All classrooms need a variety of texts as well in order to create a truly diverse and inclusive learning environment and create thoughtful, empathic citizens. Paulo Freire explains the necessary conditions for effective dialogue in *Pedagogy for the Oppressed*: "It is not our role to speak to the people about our own view of the world, not to attempt to impose that view on them, but rather to dialogue with the people about their view and ours. We must realize that their view of the world, manifested variously in their action, reflects their *situation* in the world." Therefore, reading only Walt Whitman allows students an opportunity to understand only one situation in the world without offering the opportunity to engage in a dialogue about other situations.

I chose *The Help* as a primary text because it is accessible, both academically and thematically, for all of my students. The reading level for this novel is around a seventh grade reading level, but it requires that students understand the historical and cultural context of the novel. Additionally, *The Help* is told from three different perspectives: two Black maids in the South, and a White woman from the South. The novel also includes characters that represent a range of backgrounds. The different voices allow a wider demographic of students to connect with the text while also allowing for discussion about the different perspectives of the same event.

Furthermore, *The Help* is a culturally relevant text for many of my students. Ladson-Billings emphasizes the importance in choosing text that students can relate to while also feel empowered by reading. *The Help* is a text that is representative of a portion of my students' home culture: the South. Also, this is a text that sets the example that both "minorities" (and members of the dominant culture) can be empowered through the process of writing, collaboration, and even protest.

The other texts that I have chosen span a variety of genres and voices/perspectives that are also culturally relevant for a diverse population of my students. The other texts include narratives from singer Bob Dylan, writer Idella Parker, painter David Driskell, and writer Isabel Wilkerson. In doing this, I encourage students to consider why each artist chose that medium and form to tell the story: What is told in this form that could not be told in a different form? How is the story different? In addition, I included a

variety of texts with the hope of appealing to a larger audience in my classroom; one student may respond to music while another is interested in art.

Finally, I believe this unit will encourage my students to question and consider what they read. I regularly use Socratic seminars as a tool in the classroom, and I often find that my students' chief struggle is with questioning a source of information – if mom or dad or their pastor told them that something is true, then it must be fact. The crux of this unit is the idea that truth is elastic and ambiguous, so it is highly important to question the source of information, the bias behind it, and the purpose for an author's telling a story. But that while we should be critical of everything we read, we must also understand that there is truth in all storytelling because there is power in any individual's version of the truth.

Curriculum Unit Description:

During the two weeks of this unit, I will use the following techniques to engage with the texts and essential questions at the core of the unit:

Posing life's big questions

In my classroom, I am a strong advocate for posing big questions to students as a way of empowering student opinion and building confidence to discuss big questions when they are related to a text.

Daily, students will be given a big question to free write about. This gives them an opportunity to first think about how the question relates to their own lives. Students will write without concern for spelling, punctuation or grammar and instead focus on the content of what they want to say and how they want to say it. Irvine terms this focus away from language and towards interaction between individuals "cultural synchronization." He asserts that this approach fosters relationships between teacher and student that are vital for success of multicultural students. Furthermore, my purpose is to also create strong relationships between students that will enable honest and open dialogue during the small group portion of the unit.

After students spend fifteen minutes free-writing on the topic, I will ask for 2-3 volunteers to share their work. There are multiple purposes for this technique. First, I want students to become more comfortable with speaking in front of the class and sharing writing. Second, this exercise will hopefully expose multiple ideas or versions of "truth" on one topic.

These journal entries will serve as an introduction to the topic that we will be discussing for the day.

Engaging with multigenre texts

Multiple genres will be used in my unit for multiple reasons. First of all, English I is a survey of all genres that will be studied in high school: poetry, drama, fiction, and non-fiction. This unit will work with poetry, fiction, and non-fiction. Also, Common Core emphasizes the need for multiple genres of text in the classroom. Common Core mostly calls for highly complex non-fiction text in the classroom. I have pulled in non-fiction texts that provide supplemental information about the topic of race relations, which is a focus in *The Help*.

Additionally, students will analyze and evaluate the development of theme across genres. The Common Core state standard RL.9.7 demands that students analyze one subject across two mediums and consider what is present and absent from each representation. I address this standard in across the entire unit by looking at multiple genres that address one historical time period and event.

Student-led collaborative inquiry

One of the weaknesses that I find with students in the ninth grade class lies in questioning. Coming into ninth grade, English has been a highly tested subject and so most of my students have learned the importance of good test-taking skills rather than the value of high level thinking skills. Standardized testing is high stakes for students and this learning environment affirms the importance of indisputable answers and creates a "culture of fear" for students. Wrong means failure and failure means not feeling smart.

I want to undo this backward way of thinking and encourage my students to explore all options and all answers to a question. Instead of providing students with four options to answer a question, students will have limitless possibilities. Furthermore, students will turn to one another for insight and support. This approach will work towards a "community of learners" that will place students, rather than the teacher, at the center of learning. In my prior experience with Socratic Seminars, student-led collaborative inquiry yields surprisingly analytical responses and high student engagement. Students take ownership of their learning since it is highly personal.

Writing a multigenre memoir

During the development of a culminating project for this unit, I took into consideration that most of the ninth graders I have worked with enjoy writing about themselves first and foremost. Fortunately, this unit focuses on the ways in which people tell their stories in order to convey the human truth of those experiences, so I will require students to do just that.

A multigenre paper asks students to use a variety of genres to address one topic; in a multigenre memoir, students will use a variety of genres to address the human truth in a personal experience. Each genre in the project will tell one aspect of the story, but all genres viewed together will convey a complete story of the experience. To develop this paper, I have used Tom Romano's book *Blending Genre*, *Altering Style* for suggestions of genre types and strategies for introducing the project. Furthermore, this book gives strategies for having students write in multiple genres and can be a useful resource in other lessons during this unit.

Day One: Stockett's version of truth

Before the Lesson

Begin with a journal prompt: "How do people decide what to write about? How do you decide what you want to write about?"

Lesson

Use this discussion of the journal responses to introduce the definition of memoir.

Stockett was largely inspired to write *The Help* because of her own experiences growing up in the South. She speaks about these experiences in multiple interviews and essays, and readers can draw connections between Stockett's life and the characters and events she chooses to include in her novel.

To begin the unit, students will first look at Stockett's essay "Too Little, Too Late" describing her childhood in the South. This essay is found at the end of the novel on page 525-530.

We will read the essay aloud as a class, then students will individually answer the following questions:

- 1.) What was Stockett's position in society during the Civil Rights Movement?
- 2.) Why is Stockett so conflicted in her feelings about Mississippi? How does she describe this conflict?
- 3.) Describe how Stockett and Skeeter are similar and different.
- 4.) Why was Stockett inspired to write this book?
- 5.) Is it possible for Stockett to narrate the sections from Aibileen and Minnie's perspectives? Why or why not?
- 6.) To what genre does *The Help* belong?

Then, students will get together in groups of four and discuss the questions using the answers they have constructed.

After discussion, students will reflect on discussion by answering one of the following questions in a 7-12 sentence paragraph:

- 1.) What is something that you changed your mind about after discussion? What caused you to change your mind about this?
- 2.) What is something interesting that someone said? This should be something that you had not thought of before or something that caused you to view a topic in a different way.
- 3.) If you have not changed your opinions about any of your thoughts, what are some things your group members said to solidify your opinion?

As a whole class, we will discuss the big question of the day: Is *The Help* a memoir? In what ways can we say that it is a Stockett's memoir? If not, what genre is it?

Day Two: The "real" help

Before the Lesson

Students will respond to the journal prompt: "Write about a time when you stretched the truth for effect. This could be when you talk to your parents, teachers or your friends. Why did you stretch the truth? How would your audience respond differently if you had told the exact facts?"

Lesson

Students will utilize their working definitions of narrative techniques to analyze the way Kathryn Stockett creates a fictional retelling of a historical truth that we will read about in Idella Parker's memoir.

To compare Stockett's retelling, students will look at sections of *Idella Parker: The Perfect Maid* and make connections between the texts. Students will be provided with excerpts from *Idella Parker: The Perfect Maid*. I will have them read pages 35-41 as this passage narrates events that highlight the complex relationship between the two women. In small groups, students will be assigned to a specific passage and will discuss the following questions:

- 1.) How are both accounts similar and different? Be specific.
- 2.) Was there any new information about the time period in this excerpt?
- 3.) From what point of view is the passage told? Do we lose any insight by never seeing Marjorie Rawlings' perspective? If we did see her perspective, how do you think she would describe the situation? Be specific.
- 4.) Is The Help a reliable source on this topic, even though it is fictional?
- 5.) Which account do you prefer and why?

Homework

After students have shared their conclusions with the class, they will be responsible for individually evaluating the "truth" of *The Help* in a well-constructed response:

Think about your reading of *Idella Parker: The Perfect Maid* and the discussion you had in your *groups*; is *The Help* an accurate portrayal of the relationship between maid and woman of the house? Students will use specific details from each text to support their opinion.

Day Three - Four: Three ways to report the death of Emmett Till

Before the lesson

Begin with a journal prompt: "What genre has the strongest impact on you? Are you most impacted by movies, art, music, books, articles, poems, or something else? Why do you think this genre has the strongest impact on you?

Lesson

Students will compare three accounts of the same event as a way of comparing the narrative techniques used in each genre. Students will also reflect on the ways that each genre reflects a different perspective and the impact that each genre has on its audience. This lesson will likely span two instructional days.

First, students will learn about the murder of Emmett Till by reading Isabel Wilkerson's account in *The Warmth of Other Suns*. Wilkerson's reporting of the event is on page 369-370 of the novel. We will read the account, then answer the following questions to check for comprehension:

- 1.) Who was Emmett Till?
- 2.) What happened to him during his visit to Money, Mississippi?
- 3.) What did his mother do that was so surprising?
- 4.) What effect did Mamie Till's actions have on the rest of the country?
- 5.) Describe the scene at his funeral.

Next, students will analyze Bob Dylan's account of the Emmett Till tragedy. The prominent folk-singer and activist wrote a song titled, "The Death of Emmett Till." First, students will listen to the song using the audio recording and students will follow along with the lyrics. After listening to the song once, students will individually annotate the song . Annotating requires that students write on the handout of the song by making notes, asking questions, analyzing images and uncovering themes.

After annotating the poem, students will work in groups to discuss the following analysis questions:

1.) How does Dylan use music to set the tone in the song? Be specific.

- 2.) What is the effect of this style of music? Is it appropriate given then subject?
- 3.) What is the theme, or message, that Dylan is trying to deliver to his audience? How do you know this is his message? Use specific details from the song.
- 4.) What is Dylan's purpose in writing this song? Then decide his audience. Remember that his audience cannot be everyone!
- 5.) How does Dylan use music and storytelling to deliver his message? Could another genre of text have the same effect on the audience?

The final discussion question of "The Death of Emmett Till" will segue into viewing another interpretation of the same story. As a class, we will then view David Driskell's *Behold Thy Son*. This is a painting that pays tribute to the death of Emmett Till. Using the painting and the background information provided on the website, we will discuss the meaning and "truth" of the painting using the following questions:

- 1. Why do you think David Driskell painted the main figure so the head, hands, and feet do not fit into the frame? (taken from the site)
- 2. Who do you think is holding the son?
- 3. Have you seen an image like this one? What clues make you think of these other images?
- 4. What "truth" is being expressed in this painting? Is this "truth" expressed in the other texts we have viewed today?
- 5. What is Driskell's theme, or message, in this painting?

Homework

After discussing all three texts, students will have the assignment to write a response in their journals:

How were these three texts different? In what ways were all of these texts similar? Which text affected you the most? Do you think a person can understand the truth of what happened to Emmett Till by reading just one of these texts? If so which one? If not, then why not? What is gained by reading all three?

Day Five-Six: The ambiguous perspective of a silent film

Before the Lesson

Journal Prompt: In what ways can movies tell a story differently than a book can? What techniques can be use in movies that cannot be used in books? Which do you prefer and why?

The Lesson

In order to show an example of film as a multigenre element, I will show a silent film to my classes. In showing the film, I want to focus on how each member of the class can have a unique but equally accurate impression of the characters and events from the film.

The film that I chose is FW Murnau's *Sunrise: A Song of Two Humans*. This is a film that looks at the complexities of relationships, particularly that of marriage. After being seduced by his mistress, the husband considers drowning his wife. He later realizes he still loves her, and he and his wife take a long walk through the city and consider the depth and meaning of their relationship. I chose this film because of the complex character development and possible ambiguity of meaning.

In groups of four, students will view the scene between minutes 30 and 40. This is the scene in the film where the husband contemplates, then attempts, drowning his wife. Each student will answer a series of questions about what they believe to be the plot, theme, tone, and characterization of the scene. The viewing guide for students is attached in this unit. After they view, they will share with other group members their interpretation. Students will then write a reflective piece about seeing another person's perspective.

Homework

Write a 7-12 sentence reflection about the conversation you had in your groups. How were your interpretations different? How were they the same? What did you learn from your group members? What did this exercise teach you about perspective in viewing a film?

Day Seven – Fourteen: Multigenre memoir project

The following assignment sheet details the specifics of the project and the timeline for completion. Class time will be used to work on the multigenre memoir project over these days.

Viewing guide for Sunrise: A Song of Two Humans

- 1.) What is the setting?
- 2.) What is the initial conflict in the film? How do the lighting, music, and characters actions show this?
- 3.) How does the filmmaker set the tone of the film? What is the tone? (Refer to your handout with examples of tone words)
- 4.) What inferences can you make about the female lead? Use indirect characterization to make these inferences.
- 5.) What inferences can you make about the male lead? Use indirect characterization to make these inferences.
- 6.) How is the conflict resolved?
- 7.) What is the filmmaker's message to the audience about love and relationships?
- 8.) What are your reactions to the film? Make connections to yourself, other literature, and the world around you.

Your Multigenre Memoir!

What is a <u>memoir</u>?

A memoir comes from remembering experiences in the way they felt to you in that moment. In conveying your feelings and perspectives, you are revealing TRUTH. A memoir is not like an autobiography because it only focuses on a particular moments in the author's life (the first day of school, your first kiss, the death of a loved one). These writings not only disclose memories, but they also reveal the author's thinking and feeling, and reactions to this memory. The memoir is your version of a memorable moment shaped from experiences, facts, emotions, truths, discoveries and imagination.

What is a multigenre project?

A multigenre project requires you to express one idea in a series of different genres. Remember how we looked at how various art forms have represented a single event in history, like the death of Emmett Till. Each genre expressed something new and unique about the truth of that event. Viewed together, the audience has a more complex understanding of the event. Sometimes these genres can present opposing viewpoints. A multigenre memoir will specifically address a personal experience that is meaningful for you by representing it in a variety of forms.

What are some genres I can use in my multigenre memoir?

Poem Website Journal/Diary Entries

Song Article Collage Painting Map Play

Drawing Tabloid Facebook page

Film Eulogy Letter
Cartoon PowerPoint Recipe
Postcard Fairytale Interview
Photograph Invitation Advertisement

How will I choose which genres to use?

Think about what message (theme) you want to send to your audience. Choose genres that will effectively convey that theme. For instance, a collage may present the complexity of a feeling that a single painting cannot. Or a map may be relevant if a sense of place is important in your message. You are telling the story of a personal experience, so choose the genres that feel right!

So what do I have to do, exactly?

You will create a binder that will contain all parts of your project. These parts include:

- 1. A creative and visually appealing cover page that includes your name and a creative, original title
- 2. an index that lists all parts of your project
- 3. a 500-1000 word narrative that describes the event that are representing in your project -what is the event
 - -why did you choose this event to represent
 - -what are other things your reader should know about your project, you, and the messages you are sending.
- 4. Four (4) genre projects that represent this event
- 5. One essay for each genre (a total of 4) where you explain your genre representation. Each essay needs to be between 300-500 words

What! How will I get this all done!

Like with all challenges, you should approach this project one step at a time. Here is the schedule you should follow in order to complete this project on time. There are amal due dates that lead up to the final due date at the end. If you follow this schedule, you will be successful. You'll notice that you have time in class to work as well, so remember that you can do this!

Date	Assignment Due	Amount of Class Work		
		Time		
3/19/2013	"Brainstorming for your	45 minutes		
	Memoir" due			
3/20/2013	500-1000 word narrative draft	30 minutes		
	due			
3/21/2013	First genre due	45 minutes		
3/22/2013	Second genre due	30 minutes		
3/24/2013	Third genre due	45 minutes		
3/25/2013	Fourth genre due	60 minutes		
3/26/2013	Revision of all genres and 500-	60 minutes		
	1000 word narrative due			
3/27/2013	Final Project Due – check for	None – project should		
	all parts before submitting	be complete		

Brainstorming for your Memoir

1.)	What are som	ne vivid mei	mories that	t stand	out in	your mind	as especial	lly strong

- 1.)
- 2.)
- 3.)
- 4.)
- 5.)
- 2.) Go back to your list and decide which memory is the most vivid and represents something very important to you. Circle that memory.
- 3.) Now, using that memory, **write down at least 5 emotions** that you relate to this event. Use strong, descriptive words.
- 4.) Based on those words, create a **theme statement** for your project. This is the message that you want to send to your audience when you share your story with them. Remember that all of your genres will have to convey this theme.

Annotated Bibliography

Freire, Paulo. *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. New York: Continuum, 1970.

This book provides theory for the pedagogical strategies that empower the impoverished or discriminated by examining the treatment of oppressed populations outside of the United States. Freire emphasizes dialogue and critical thinking that place the student at the center of the classroom conversation.

Irvine, J.J. *Black students and school failure: Policies, practices and prescriptions.* Westport: Greenwood, 1990.

Irvine addresses the shortcomings of the current school system by identifying the ways in which it is failing our highest need students. While most of the book looks at fixes for the larger system, Irvine also proposes some classroom strategies/approaches.

Ladson-Billings, Gloria. "Towards a Theory of Culturally Relevant Pedagogy." *American Educational Research Journal* 32, no.3 (Autumn 1995): 465-91.

This article follows eight teachers and the strategies they have found to be successful in inner city schools. This article aims to connect the classroom to students' culture in order to empower and more effectively educate students of color. While it is mostly theoretical, this article does provide some classroom ideas for culturally relevant education.

Neal, Mary-Anne. "Engaging Students Through Effective Questions." *Education Canada* 51, no. 1 (2010).

Neal discusses questioning that builds on students' critical thinking by using Bloom's Taxonomy as a guide. She also looks at ways to use questioning to keep students interested in the lesson at hand.

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

This book thoroughly defines and explores the purpose of multigenre writing, and it supplies useful multigenre writing prompts and activities to use in your classroom.

Reading List for Students

- David Driskell, "Behold Thy Son", 1931. Oil on canvas, 40in x 30 in. Collection of National Museum of African American History and Culture.
- Dylan, Bob. "The Death of Emmett Till." *The Bootleg Series, Vol. 9: The Witmark Demos: 1962-1964*. Columbia. 10/19/2010. CD.
- Parker, Idella, and Mary Keating. *Idella: Marjorie Rawlings' Perfect Maid*. Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1992.
- Stockett, Kathryn. The Help. New York, NY: Berkley, 2009.
- Sunrise: A Song of Two Humans. Directed by F.W. Murnau. 1927. New York, NY: 20th Century Fox Home Entertainment, 2003. DVD.
- Wilkerson, Isabel. *The Warmth of Other Suns: The Epic Story of America's Great Migration*. New York: Vintage Books, 2010.

List of Materials for Classroom Use

- David Driskell, "Behold Thy Son", 1931. Oil on canvas, 40in x 30 in. Collection of National Museum of African American History and Culture.
- Dylan, Bob. "The Death of Emmett Till." *The Bootleg Series, Vol. 9: The Witmark Demos: 1962-1964*. Columbia. 10/19/2010. CD.
- Sunrise: A Song of Two Humans. Directed by F.W. Murnau. 1927. New York, NY: 20th Century Fox Home Entertainment, 2003. DVD.

End Notes

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ⁱ Freire Paulo, Pedagogy of the Oppressed (New York: Continuum, 1970), 88.

ii Freire, 96.

iii Gloria Ladson-Billings, "Towards a Theory of Culturally Relevant Pedagogy," *American Educational Research Journal* 32, no.3 (Autumn 1995): 465-91.

^{iv}Jacqueline J. Irvine. Black students and school failure: Policies, practices and prescriptions (Westport, CT: Greenwood, 1990), 21.

^v Ladson-Billings, 465-91.

vi Tom Romano. Blending Genre, Altering Style: Writing Multigenre Papers (Portsmouth: Boynton/Cook, 2000), 5.