Across Property Lines: Textual Ownership in Writing Groups
by Candace Spigelman
REVIEWED BY JANE MIKINI

Everyone Can Write: Essays Toward a Hopeful Theory of Writing and Teaching Writing
by Peter Elbow
REVIEWED BY TOM THOMPSON

Blending Genre, Altering Style: Writing Multigenre Papers
by Tom Romano
REVIEWED BY STEPHEN SMARJESSE

Writers’ groups became my favorite practice for liberating what I termed silenced writers, because the groups decentralized authority in the classroom and provided student writers with an immediate audience and a forum where their work could be affirmed as a product of their own ideas. Most of the time these groups worked well, but there were times when even the most productive groups did little more than edit papers. I knew something was lacking, but did not know what that something was until I read the first chapter of Candace Spigelman’s Across Property Lines: Textual Ownership in Writing Groups.

Spigelman notes that in “both academic and nonacademic settings most writers embrace the notion of textual ownership and . . . it continues to factor decisively in writing group operations in both contexts” (15). She claims that the writers who benefit most from group work are those who “recognize themselves as the central authority” over their texts, because they are able to temporarily yield control to group members and allow them to actively engage in their work (68). I had not considered the impact of the writing group on writers who were still in the process of developing authorial control, but this book prompted me to think more carefully about my students’ perceptions of textual ownership and how it shaped the work they were doing in peer groups.

Based on her study of two writing groups, one in an academic setting, the other a private informal group, Spigelman addresses differences between public and private writing as a prelude to her analysis of attitudes about the concepts of textual ownership and their effects on writing group performance. At the heart of the
problem is a tension inherent in writing groups that requires students to “relinquish their texts, to create as well as to find meanings, to understand knowledge as socially constructed by groups as well as privately held by individuals, and to use their peers’ work as unattributed sources” (22).

This explanation of the social constructivist nature of group work prompted me to consider the potential for confusing students who were in the process of staking out a sense of ownership of their work. How did they feel about work that was produced in a group where peers functioned as “coauthors” (68)? Did they feel a sense of authority over a text they had revised by incorporating changes suggested by peers? Had I inadvertently confused the notion of ownership when I encouraged my students to appropriate others’ ideas in their revisions? The last thing teachers want to do is to confuse students with mixed messages about knowledge making, but that’s exactly what we are doing when we fail to consider the varied and complex notions of ownership and the ways in which the tasks of group work conflict with those ideas.

Aside from the inhibiting effect of group work on students’ writing processes, Spigelman adds that student writers must also contend with social and institutional pressures created by the academic setting, which manifests in “varied interpretations of academic conventions regarding the ethics and methods of appropriating source material” (71). But, what are teachers to do? In most cases, we cannot change the realities of the setting for student writing groups. Nor can we remove the evaluative mandate of instruction.

Spigelman recommends that we begin by coming to terms with the power teachers have in writing classrooms, where “student writers must take into account the presence of the teacher, who as silent member, calls meetings, sets the agenda and monitors productivity.” We must also consider that student writers, unlike writers who belong to private groups, always face “issues of evaluation and, in many settings, real or imagined competition for grades” (110).

I had to admit that competition, which had nurtured my own writing, could be inhibiting my students’ ability to develop textual ownership in their written works. I wondered if competition, when combined with the pressures inherent in the setting, contributed to the silencing of my students? I had to admit that my lack of understanding of students’ perceptions of ownership probably had shaped the quality of group work. One thing was clear: I had many more questions than answers about my approach to teaching writing.

While Spigelman’s book doesn’t offer the kind of practical solutions many of us have come to expect, it is an important work which prompts writing teachers to reflect on the complications that arise from unexamined pedagogy, particularly as it relates to contradictory notions about ownership in writing groups. Her book is not for the faint of heart, and I wouldn’t recommend reading it unless you are prepared to allow her claims to provoke questions about your own classroom practices.

Rather than finding answers to my questions, I found that Spigelman’s careful treatment of the issues helped me gain a better understanding of the reasons my students have struggled to establish authority in their written works. With that understanding, I think I’m going to be a little more patient with my developing writers and allow them the space to take control of their work, word by word.

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Everyone Can Write: Essays Toward a Hopeful Theory of Writing and Teaching Writing


When I first saw that Peter Elbow had a new volume of essays, I was excited. Even when I disagree with what he says, I can always count on him to challenge my thinking about what is possible in the classroom. A cursory glance at the table of contents, however, disappointed me. Rather than a collection of new essays, this volume seemed to be little more than Peter Elbow’s Greatest Hits. Further, as I read the first “new” essay, I realized that it wasn’t “new” at all, but was simply a published version of a lecture I had heard Elbow deliver eight years ago.

As I worked my way through the essay, however, I realized that I wasn’t reading “old” material, but rather was enjoying the fruit of Elbow’s particular writing process—a process that can let a piece “cook” and “grow” for several years before it reaches publication. Besides, many readers probably missed most of these essays when they were first published, either because the essays appeared in less-prominent forums or because they were published ten or even
twenty years ago. Even those readers familiar with the essays will discover that many have been revised, with some pieces merely excerpted as “fragments” to complement other pieces in the collection. Finally, Elbow has grouped the pieces topically to offer a reasonably coherent presentation of his theory of teaching writing—a theory which merits careful consideration by anyone who teaches writing.

For that reason alone, this volume belongs in the library of everyone who teaches or studies composition theory. Previous efforts to infer Elbow’s theory, usually based on only a few articles, come mostly from opponents of “romantic” or “expressivist” approaches. Even though I have trouble with Elbow’s claim that more writing—with no intervention and no audience other than the writer—leads “inevitably” to better writing, I’d rather get the argument from Elbow himself than from someone hostile to the concept.

Elbow’s theory is, as the title states, “hopeful.” Although he acknowledges that “good writing takes hard work and skill,” he bases his approach to teaching writing on what he terms some “hopeful truths”:

It is possible for anyone to produce a lot of writing with pleasure and satisfaction and without too much struggle.

It is possible for anyone to figure out what he or she really means and wants to say and finally get it clear on paper.

It is possible for anyone to write things that others will want to read.

When people manage to say what they really mean and to get themselves into their writing, readers tend to have the experience of making contact with the writer—an experience that most people seek (xiv).

These premises might seem more “utopian” than “hopeful,” but Elbow embraces utopian models, arguing that we need such models to help us see through deceptions served up by common sense. For example, he notes that, although observation tells us the sun revolves around the earth, we now accept as “true” a model that tells us the exact opposite. If we accept such “truths” to help us understand the physical world, it seems only reasonable to consider equally utopian (or hopeful) “truths” to help us understand how writers write.

The first writer Elbow attempts to understand is himself. In “Illiteracy at Oxford and Harvard,” he recounts his struggles to write in college—he dropped out of Harvard before his inability to write caused him to flunk out—and attempts to make sense of his experience. The next chapter, “A Map of Writing in Terms of Audience and Response,” turns practical, offering twelve different sites for writing, or twelve different kinds of writing teachers can assign. The third chapter, “The Uses of Binary Thinking,” is highly theoretical, arguing that thinking in opposites can help us better understand any object or idea under consideration, and that “contrary claims can both be right or valid” (73). These chapters, along with a fragment excerpted from the 1998 edition of Writing Without Teachers, comprise the first section, “Premises and Foundations.” The remaining sections—“The Generative Dimension,” “Speech, Writing, and Voice,” “Discourses, Teaching,” and “Evaluation and Grading”—are equally diverse in style and focus. Despite their diversity, however (or perhaps because of it), these pieces provide a reasonable explanation of Elbow’s perspective on the enterprise of teaching writing.

Everyone Can Write is not a systematic explication of a coherent theory of writing. Elbow himself admits that a “skeptical reader might say that this book is just a collection of unrelated essays . . . and not be wrong” (xiii). In fact, Peter Elbow’s Greatest Hits might be an appropriate title. Still, this collection of “hits,” drawn from three decades of musings and reflections, demands the attention of anyone seriously interested in teaching writing.

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Blending Genre, Altering Style: Writing Multigenre Papers


For me, part of good teaching includes creating new assignments to fit the students’ interests and changes in society. When the year changed from 1999 to 2000, my assignments seemed antiquated, and I was even more inspired to find unique ideas for teaching writing.
Tom Romano’s newest book, *Blending Genre, Altering Style: Writing Multigenre Papers*, introduced me to a creative research approach. A colleague recommended this book as an extension of the I-Search format established by Ken Macrorie, which emphasizes primary sources rather than secondary information and frees the researcher to write about discoveries using first person pronouns. Romano’s approach offers even more creative opportunities.

Multigenre papers are layered with poetry, letters, scripts, song lyrics, narratives, and news articles created in response to information found through research. The basis for Romano’s approach is to “[r]esist explaining, summing up, and analyzing. Create scenes instead. Become like the novelist or filmmaker” (72). Personal topics, such as family history, take a new appearance and tone when the writer creates a letter that an ancestor did not have time to write. In a traditional report on a typical research topic such as anorexia, the writer funnels information from primary or secondary sources into a standard form. When the writer uses the same source information to write a multigenre paper, however, the facts might become the basis of a realistic diary for a fictional victim of the disease, and the finished product might also include photographs, original drawings, or photocopied art.

The multigenre paper thus engages students in a higher level of creative thought. At the same time, it helps them develop and hone their basic skills. Rather than summarizing the information in a report, they use the facts to create multiple “[g]enres of narrative thinking,” which Romano tells us “require writers to be concrete and precise. They can’t just tell in abstract language. They can’t just be paradigmatic. They must show. They must make their topics palpable” (26).

The multigenre paper is a new concept for most readers, and those who expect a traditional research paper will quickly lose their way. Romano discovered through classroom experience that students must orient readers by writing an introduction that clearly explains the process used in developing the paper and that also contextualizes the topic. He suggests that the first genre to follow the introduction be carefully chosen, because its powerful position will set the tone for the entire product.

He invites teachers interested in having students plunge into multigenre papers to use his examples, written by students ranging from elementary to college age, until students can provide their own models. Teachers interested in finding out more about multigenre papers will find references, lists of works cited, and helpful resources, including step-by-step instructions, exercises, and classroom strategies for specific parts of the process. Teachers not yet ready to take the plunge might make use of the chapters devoted to a specific genre, such as “The Many Ways of Poems,” which offers a new look at haiku and introduces newer forms such as poems for two voices.

Sandy Nesvig, Minnesota Writing Project fellow and middle-school language arts teacher whom Romano quotes in the book, has been using the multigenre approach since she heard the author speak about it several years ago. In her experience, “the approach works well for all students because of the independence it allows. It especially works well for the artistic student who often includes poetry and visual products like collages.” She agrees with Romano’s observations that there are two ways of learning—emotional and intellectual. Nesvig believes that the multigenre approach promotes a very different way of knowing, “It is a close way of learning, and it allows kids to become emotionally involved.”

At the heart of this research approach lies an important academic discussion about the value of narrative product rather than expository writing. Romano proposes that “[i]n multigenre papers writers can combine fact with imagination to invent scenes that illustrate truth, or ... to render scenes that actually happened but whose details have been lost. Imagination, after all, is a powerful way of knowing” (68).

I find Romano’s multigenre approach to research inspiring. After twenty-nine years in a traditional school setting, I found the appeal of teaching in an alternative school irresistible, and Romano has given me an important tool for teaching in a new environment.

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