

Workshop 5: Teaching Multigenre Writing

Laurie Swistak's Reflections

What is FQI?

These children really needed some kind of a blueprint in order to have a well-done project. So we developed the facts, questions, and interpretation. And every child researches their project and lists their facts. And they have four different sheets that they could use. From the facts, they talk about questions that they develop. What really comes to your mind when you look at that particular fact? Then they write the question. The third component of that is the interpretation piece. That's the different genres that they could use to answer their questions.

So by the time they're ready to actually begin their writing, they have all of those things in place, especially the interpretation piece, because we were finding that children were doing acrostic poems a lot; they were doing something that was really very simple. And I wanted them to go more deeply into their topic. And I do think that this is going to do that for them.

Using multiple genres to explore people and events

I wanted the children to write in different genres, because it's so important to their learning process and their writing process. And by doing this FQI, leading them into different genres, they also look more deeply into a person's life. They look more deeply into an event. And this kind of came about when I asked the children once—they were looking at Michelangelo because we were talking about a book—and I said, "How would the world be different if Michelangelo had never been born?" And one little person said to me, "Oh, well, somebody else would have done it." And I immediately thought, they're missing the importance of—everyone's life is important but they really missed this. And I wanted to lead them into this.

By looking at the different genres, they truly do look very deeply into a person's life. And they look at how events in the world or the nation have changed a nation or changed a world. And they remember it, and it's very, very important to them, and it's important to me to see that learning process going on.

Defining and choosing genres - part 1

Genres, I like them to come up with them. And as we're thinking and as we're going through this FQI process, they came up with a lot of the ideas themselves. It would be easier for me to hand them a list. And they do have a list just to refer to. But by asking them questions and getting them to think more clearly about it, then, they come up with many of the genres themselves. And by sharing them in class, the other children get that advantage; they hear what other ideas are out there, so that they might be able to incorporate them.

Defining and choosing genres - part 2

I require a research piece, which is two to four pages long. And I need that because I need to see how their information is coming forward. I've had students that have chosen books that are much too difficult for them to read. So this year, what we did is, we made sure that all the research that they're getting, all the books that they're gathering, are age appropriate. The research piece is required. I'm requiring a ten-room poem. I was unfamiliar with it until last year—a six-room poem, I'm sorry. And it was terrific. It's so well done and it really brings them deeper into their topic. I am requiring that. I do require a newspaper article and that's of their choosing and I do require a fiction piece. They write ten pieces together, so the other six pieces are free choice this year. Before, I've required other things but I'm kind of going with the freedom of the interpretation piece this year. So they have six free choices this year.

Using inquiry in multigenre writing

By using that inquiring process, you get them to be inquirers. They begin to think and they begin to learn by their own thinking process. And that's much better for them and it's much more long-lasting than if I do everything for them.

I've had students come back to me after this process, after the multigenre process, and said that it was the best thing that they had ever done, which is kind of a sad commentary on the middle school, but the best thing that they had ever done and they wished they could do it every single year because they had to think so much and they had to question so much and they had to find their own answers. And it's been long-lasting and it's very rewarding to me as a teacher.

Importance of student choice

If you give them choice, then they have ownership. It's much more important to

give them choice in their learning process because it is long-lasting. I think it's harder to do sometimes. It's much harder to let go and give up some of that control. But what do I want from them? I want them to be risk takers, I want them to be lifelong learners, and I want them to be thinkers. And, by allowing them to do that, that's what I'm getting from them and that's what I want.