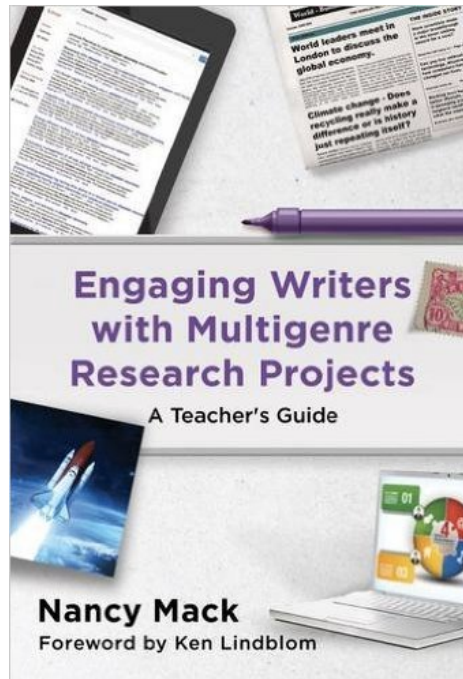


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Review of Engaging Writers with Multigenre Research Projects: A Teacher's Guide

Reviewer: Jessica F. Kobe
The University of Georgia, Athens, GA



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Are you a teacher or a teacher educator? Are you committed to providing student writers with opportunities to do research? Are you interested in refining your capacity to help students produce compelling pieces about interesting topics? If so, you should check out Nancy Mack's (2015) book: *Engaging Writers with Multigenre Research Projects*. She offers her readers an engaging and rigorous alternative to the traditional essay-based research projects educators often assign. She argues, like their more traditional counterparts, multigenre research projects require writers to: do extensive research, build a works cited page, and synthesize information across various sources. But, she continues, they also differ in important ways. Traditional projects are teacher-centered and skills-based; teachers expect students to produce a standard essay that includes an introduction, three to five supporting paragraphs, and a conclusion. In contrast, multigenre folklore projects are student-centered and process-focused. Since students weave their insights into a coherent story, every writer generates a unique and creative product that highlights their strengths.

Mack begins by acquainting her readers with the definition, purpose, and potential of having students engage in multigenre research work (Romano, 1995, 2000, 2013) about folklore topics of their choice. Mack explains that these kinds of projects require writers to: supplement and juxtapose archived textual sources with interviews conducted with family and community members who have first-person experiences with the topics being investigated. Writers then communicate the multifaceted knowledge they have acquired through carefully selected genres and graphics. Building the report from real-life genres invites students to use their individual strengths with graphics, media, music, and art and challenges them to master unfamiliar genres (p. 1). Put differently, when

student writers engage in this kind of work they are empowered to creatively author captivating texts about topics they find interesting. And while they are engaged in the process, they have opportunities to expand their research and writing skills. Mack terms these kinds of projects multigenre folklore research projects.

In order to understand how Mack conceives of multigenre folklore research projects, it is important to understand how she defines "multigenre research" and "folklore." Mack explains that Tom Romano's (1995, 2000, 2013) work on multigenre research writing inspired her to integrate this kind of writing into her curriculum. This format provides students with opportunities to decide what to include in their reports and how to share what they are learning with others. They choose their topics, select genres that will help them convey particular perspectives, and weave their pieces together into a multidimensional yet coherent story.

Mack defines folklore by breaking the word into its respective parts. She explains, "*Folk* refers to common people and their traditions or customs" and "*Lore* refers to the stories and information shared from person to person" (p. 13). In essence, folklore topics are those which can be directly connected to people's lived experiences (see chapter one for list of topics). Mack argues that when students have opportunities to inquire into folklore topics they are challenged to document people's everyday lives and consider how the information they gather informs their understanding of their topic. Instead of relying solely on texts written by experts, students seek out first-hand accounts related to their topic of inquiry. As a result, students develop a deeper yet more nuanced understanding of their topic. In turn, this challenges students to (re)consider how they define expertise, where they seek out information, and how they judge the

reliability of sources. Since students are interacting face-to-face with members of their family and community, they must contemplate how they can ethically and accurately represent people's lived experiences in their project.

In an attempt to make sure that the multigenre folklore research projects that she assigns live up to their potential, she foregrounds the following commitments. First, she invites students to research topics that are in some way connected to their lived experiences. She argues that when student interest is high, it is likely they will put forth the effort necessary to produce high quality work and ultimately expand their research and writing skills. Second, she challenges students to consult numerous primary and secondary sources. She always requires them to design and conduct a research interview with a real person because, "Knowledge from a real person is more immediate, emotional and tangible for writers" (p. 4). Lastly she requires students to produce creative, multimodal, multigenre projects that showcase their strengths and insights. When students have opportunities to make decisions about how to creatively publish their work, they are more likely to produce projects that they are proud to share with their friends, family, and community.

At the end of her introduction, Mack invites educators to imagine how they might integrate multigenre folklore research work into their school or community-based settings. In the next nine chapters, Mack calls on her experience facilitating multigenre folklore work with various groups of writers specifically referencing her experiences with secondary students, pre-service and in-service teachers, and male prison inmates. She highlights the important role educators play in the research, writing, and publication process. She explicitly addresses how teachers can help writers: select

topics, acquire important research skills, explore the potentials of various genres and literary devices, and create multimodal, multigenre representations of what they learned that they are eager to share with others. Following a brief introduction, each chapter is divided into four sections: "motivators and inspirations", "minilessons," "more strategies and activities," and "tips and resources." Many of the resources she references are housed on her companion website. Whenever possible, she describes how other educators and scholars have facilitated similar work with student writers. This format makes it possible for interested readers to easily locate the resources they need to design lessons and units for their students.

Mack concludes her book by reminding her readers that the comprehensive yet flexible framework she introduces can be adapted to fit various contexts. She provides specific examples of how some of her former students have facilitated multigenre research projects in their 6-12 classrooms. She also includes examples of how college professors who work with undergraduate and graduate students across disciplines have integrated multigenre research projects into their classes.

Although Mack describes many settings within which multigenre folklore research projects can be produced, a discussion about how elementary-aged students might do so is conspicuously absent. While Mack alludes to the fact that this kind of work can be done in elementary school settings, she attends most closely to how college professors, teacher educators, and 6-12 teachers might facilitate multigenre folklore work with student writers. For instance, at the end of her book Mack includes a table that helps teachers recognize the ways the lessons and activities she describes in her book align with the 6-12 Common Core State Standards. Since she did not include the K-5 Standards, it is harder

for elementary school teachers to make similar connections.

Her inattention to elementary-aged students could be read to suggest that young children are not old enough or skilled enough to engage in this kind of authentic and rigorous work (Lee & Vagle, 2010). As a result, young children may miss out on the powerful experience of producing multigenre folklore research projects about topics of their choice. As a former elementary school teacher, I would argue that young children are capable of producing multigenre folklore research projects and thus Mack's work is applicable to elementary school teachers. Interested teachers could look to scholars including Lucy Calkins (2003) and Katie Wood Ray (2004, 2006) who write about facilitating authentic writing work with young children to adapt Mack's ideas to fit the elementary context.

Researchers might also find this text helpful, especially those who are committed to doing participatory research. When researchers invite participants to play an active role in the research process, they are typically interested in accessing their participants' perspectives and experiences. Since they understand research to be a responsibility rather than a recipe (Dillard, 2000), they carefully consider how they invite such participation. They are apt to privilege methods that not only shed light on their research questions, but also ones that will likely influence their participants' lives in positive ways. Whether working with children, adolescents, or adults, giving participants the opportunity to produce multigenre folklore research projects enables researchers to do both.

As a former teacher and current graduate student teaching assistant at a large university in the southeastern United States, I recognize that

educators might have difficulty defending their decision to integrate multigenre research projects into their curriculum. Hence, the part of Mack's text that I appreciate the most is the way she helps teachers imagine how they can facilitate opportunities for student writers to engage in meaningful, authentic, rigorous work in standards-based, performance-driven environments. Over and over again she illustrates how producing multigenre research projects will first and foremost benefit student writers. At the same time, she acknowledges that most teachers are given a curriculum and set of standards that they must follow. Mack helps educators see how assigning multigenre folklore research projects enables them to make curricular decisions that reflect their students' needs and interests without neglecting the knowledge, skills, and dispositions prescribed in the standards.

As is evident in my review, Mack's book has the potential to reach many audiences. Whether you are a K-12 teacher, teacher educator, or researcher this book may be of interest to you. By highlighting the benefits and challenges of doing multigenre folklore research with diverse groups of writers, Mack helps her readers anticipate the successes and struggles they might face. The comprehensive set of activities, tips, and strategies that she integrates throughout her text, provides readers with the resources necessary to launch multigenre folklore research projects in their contexts. She articulates how she has adjusted her practice in response to the needs and interests of the writers with whom she works, inviting her readers to do the same. All educators, novice and veteran alike, who ask students to produce research projects would benefit from reading Nancy Mack's book, *Engaging Writers with Multigenre Research Projects*.

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