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## All-American Boys, The Hate U Give, and The Great Gatsby: The Process and Product of Multi-Genre in a High School English Methods Course

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## All-American Boys, The Hate U Give, and The Great Gatsby: The Process and Product of Multi-Genre in a High School English Methods Course

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### Abstract

*"All-American Boys, The Hate U Give, and The Great Gatsby: The Process and Product of Multi-Genre in a High School English Methods Course"* explains the process of teaching an eight-week multi-genre project to a high school English methods class and within the process highlights student's representative examples. The cumulative assignment in the course aims to have a digital multi-genre project that they can serve as an exemplar to support their writing instruction as first-year teachers the following year. Bridging the author's voice with the student's voice, the MGP enhances student writing by showing that reading and writing can be relevant to their own lives and a powerful tool for self-expression.

### Keywords

multi-genre, multi-cultural literature, reading and writing, writing identity

***All-American Boys, The Hate U Give, and The Great Gatsby: The Process and Product of Multi-Genre in a High School English Methods Course***

**I, Too**

I, too, sing America.

I am the darker brother.  
They send me to eat in the kitchen  
When company comes,  
But I laugh,  
And eat well,  
And grow strong.

Tomorrow,  
I'll be at the table  
When company comes.  
Nobody'll dare  
Say to me,  
"Eat in the kitchen,"  
Then.

Besides,  
They'll see how beautiful I am  
And be ashamed —

I, too, am America.

*-Langston Hughes*

*Kailyn*

Let me give you some context. This multi-genre project titled, "Am I, too, America?" began by asking a question to one of my favorite authors, Langston Hughes (2012), who wrote one of my favorite poems, "I, Too." In Langston Hughes' poem, you can hear his voice, his dignity, and his hope. He is confident in his future as a Black man. However, even today, in the thick of the Black Lives Matter movement and the pandemic, the question "Am I, too, America?" is a question that I ask. Further, as you read my multi-genre project, I pose a question to you – what does it mean to be American, and how do I get to say that I am "that?" For this multi-genre project, I read a fictional text, *All-American Boys*, which deals with a theme in literature that remains, tragically, relevant today: police brutality.

**Dear Reader Letter and Writing Genre One**

The MGP begins with a “Dear Reader” letter that includes several components: a title for the project, a summary of the text read, a discussion of the theme and research, and an invitation to read further. While the “Dear Reader” letter begins the MGP, it is usually written at the end of the MGP process. Below is an excerpt from Kailyn and shows how she used statistics in her "Dear Reader" letter to report police arrests and Black persons killed by the police while in their custody. These statistics shed light on the ongoing social injustices in our society and relate to the theme of police brutality in the novel,

*All American Boys:*

...Over 1,000 people have been killed by police in 2017 – 1,079 based on my research. Out of those 1,079 people, African-Americans make up nearly one-third of the people despite only being just over thirteen percent of our nation's population. Additionally, as of November 6, 2017, there were only 10 days in that current year where the police didn't kill someone. 10 days. Did you know that a Black person is three times more likely to get killed by the police than a white person? Well, yep. That's a fact. Here is another fact for you. In 2014, 69% of Black people killed by the police were unarmed and non-violent suspects. And, I will close my real facts with this: 90% of the cases involving an officer in a crime went with no legal consequences. Only 10% of police officers were actually charged, with roughly 5% convicted...

Kailyn ends her "Dear Reader" letter by asking her audience to ponder the question, "Am I too, America?" Her excerpt follows:

Each genre in this project uses real feelings, real pictures, real evidence to pair nonfiction with my understanding of the fictional text, *All-American Boys*. Each genre seeks to ask or answer the question, Am I too, America? As you read along, please understand that this question extends beyond the novel *All-American Boys*. "Am I, too, America?" is a question that I ask of myself more than I should.

After writing the Dear Reader letter, Kailyn begins her first of five writing genres with a letter titled "A Letter to My Future Son."

#### **Letter to My Future Son**

To my unborn son,

Here I am, writing a letter to you though I don't even know if you will ever be real. However, there are some important things you need to know. Out here, people will look at your chocolate skin and not see what I see. While I see smooth, innocent, and sweet, some may see rough, guilty, and in the wrong. While I see talented, unique, and personable, others may see a thug, mischievous, black body. Therefore, I want you to know a few things, just in case one day I am not here to tell you them:

1. Always carry your I.D. You need it on you at all times. Don't ever leave home without it!
2. Don't wear your hood up at night. And don't have your hands in your pockets either!
3. Don't wear your pants too low. Always wear a belt!
4. Don't play with a toy gun at the playground.
5. Don't forget to use your turn signal.
6. Keep your hands where people can see them.
7. Don't linger too long in a store, or people will think you are stealing.

8. Try to avoid hanging out with more than three Black male friends at once. You don't want anyone to think you are in a gang.

9. Watch your eye contact. Some people may find it threatening.

10. This, here, is the most important rule! Listen to this one, please, son: If you are stopped by the police, "Never fight back. Never talk back. Keep your hands up. Keep your mouth shut. Just do what they ask you to do, and you'll be fine." (Reynold & Kiely, 2015, p. 50)

11. Actually, this is the most important to remember: I love you. You are perfect, smart, talented, unique, amazing, and beautifully made.

Refer back to these rules in case you forget. I'll be there to remind you. Your black skin is not a crime to me. Your black body will always matter to me. While I wrote this letter with the world of today in mind, I hope you will never have to face this type of world. I hope that when you do come along and bless my life, that America will recognize that you are American, too!

Love always,  
Your future mom!

Table 1.1 Letter to My Future Son

*Dr. Cancienne*

Among all the components of effective writing, we, as teachers, want our students to read and write with purpose, passion, and perspective. We want our students and especially our students of color to know that they matter in the world and that their life has meaning (Love, 2019). Ideally, we hope that students lose themselves in a story, question and wonder, see themselves in characters, realize that they are not alone, speak truth to power and injustice, and heal and transform. These potential engagements with reading and writing are starting points for teaching voice in writing, a necessary component of effective writing. Without a strong voice, we compromise our dignity and our power (Love, 2019). One of the most meaningful assignments that meets this challenge is Tom Romano's (2000) literature-based, multi-genre research project (MGP). The MGP (digital or printed) is multi-modal in form and multi-genre in writing, combining exposition and creative writing centered on a literary theme. Romano (2000) defines the multi-genre project as the following: A multi-genre paper arises from research, experience, and imagination... A multi-genre paper is composed 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 (x-xi). While this definition may seem overwhelming to you, this article explains the multi-genre project process and provide representative student examples submitted as a final assignment in a high school English methods course.

To provide an overview of the project, I asked high school English candidates taking a methods course to read a young adult or classical text that addressed such critical issues as identity, race, gender, class, etc., about which they are passionate about and to research and respond using five writing genres to highlight a theme in the text. The project aims to have a digital multi-genre project that they can serve as an exemplar to support their writing instruction as first-year teachers the following year.

To provide context for the conversation that follows, we explain the teachers' relationships to each other and our experiences with using the MGP. Dr. Cancienne is a high school English methods professor, Kailyn, now a third-year teacher, Bria, now a fourth-year teacher, and Kristina, now a fifth-year teacher, were graduate students in an English education program and wrote multi-genre projects in Dr. Cancienne's high school English methods graduate course. Kailyn and Bria discuss excerpts from their MGPs. Kristina discusses the power of the MGP in working with her 11th grade English class. The three MGP novels highlighted with project examples are *All American Boys* by Jason Reynolds and Brendan Kiely (2015), *The Hate U Give* by Angie Thomas (2017), and *The Great Gatsby* by F. Scott Fitzgerald (1925). The novels' themes on which students focused their MGPs are police brutality, self-discovery, and fashion and crime.

In *All American Boys*, Rashad, a Black high schooler, is falsely accused by a police officer of stealing. Quinn, a white classmate, witnesses a police officer he knows brutally beat Rashad, his classmate. The two boys come together to make a hard choice. Angie Thomas's *The Hate U Give* tells the story of Starr Carter, an African-American 16-year-old who lives in Garden Heights, a predominantly poor black neighborhood, while she attends a predominantly white private school, Williamson Prep. During spring break, Starr leaves a party with her childhood best friend, Khalil, and on their way home, they are stopped by a police officer. What was supposed to be a routine traffic stop turns tragic when the officer kills Khalil. These two young adult novels differ significantly from the third novel we discuss. A classic set in New York during the Great Depression, F. S. Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* tells the story of Jay Gatsby, a self-made millionaire, and his pursuit of Daisy Buchanan, a young woman he loved in his

youth but who later married into a wealthy family. All three novels are currently read at the high school level and are well suited for writing MGPs.

### **Standards of Learning**

In my high school English methods course, students ask at the beginning of each academic year, "How do I teach all of the standards? There is never enough time." I recommend methods students use the digital, literature-based, multi-genre research project because it encompasses many of the Virginia Standards of Learning and because the project is digital, it works with students who learn online, hybrid, or face-to-face. The project includes the following elements: a project title, a dear reader letter, five writing genres based on a theme, a unifying element for the five genres, a notes page that discusses the ideas, process, and research for creating the writing genres, and finally, a bibliography. In short, the MGP covers the many standards of learning and integrates all of the four major strands (i.e., reading, writing, research, and multi-modal literacies). It incorporates many of the essential ideas, skills, and processes that students learn each year in a 9th-12th grade high school English course, including communicating in various writing genres, reading a range of fiction and nonfiction texts, writing through a recursive process, conducting credible research, writing citations, polishing their understanding of grammar, usage, and mechanics, using technology to produce writing products and presenting their digital projects to an audience.

### **Getting Started**

To start the eight-week MGP, I ask students the following question: 1) What societal issues interest you? Students make lists, explain why, and then share and discuss their responses in small groups. The small-group discussions and whole-class discussions are essential because students can benefit greatly from listening to classmates' ideas. Once students have identified a critical issue, other collaborative tasks that are helpful to jumpstart students' imaginations are to collaborate with the school librarian to organize by critical issues young adult literature, plays, graphic novels, and classics and provide summaries of books; host book talks, and engage in "speed dating" (Gallagher & Kittle, 2018). Students should have two weeks before making their decisions.

### The MGP Graphic Organizer

Once students select their books, I ask them to organize the reading chapters by dividing the book into four parts, reading one part per week. Students document through reading logs during and after their reading (Gallagher & Kittle, 2018) the major events, character's relationships to each other, potential themes, students' connections to the text, and their writing genre ideas. Rosenblatt (1978), the author of reader-response theory, asserts that when a reader reads an author's text, the two come together to make meaning of the text based on the reader's past experiences, thus creating an "aesthetic" experience." In aesthetic reading, the reader's attention is centered directly on what he is living through during his relationship with that particular text" (p. 25). According to Rosenblatt, the reader will make the most authentic connections with the characters to whom they can relate, thus moving the student to start making sense of their own life.

An example of Rosenblatt's "aesthetic" experience is seen below in the multi-genre graphic organizer based on the text, *The Hate U Give*, and the theme of self-discovery. In reading the second row, Bria states that for one of her five writing genres, she will write a letter to all Black girls, and in this letter, she will give advice drawing from the advice that Starr's parents gave to her and the advice that her parents gave to her when she was in high school. She will use two sources to inform her writing: *The Hate U Give* by Angie Thomas (2017) and *Between the World and Me* by Ta-Nehisi Coates (2015). Returning to Rosenblatt's reader-response theory, Bria connects to Starr's main character in the novel as both she and Starr have similar experiences as Black girls. As seen below, the graphic organizer, a tool of the multi-genre project, serves as a scaffold for student's later genre writing tasks. The first row asks students to identify the writing genre, describe the genre and sources used to inform the writing.

### Multi-Genre Graphic Organizer

Writing-Genre	Description of the student's ideas for writing genres based on the reading	Sources/Articles



Letter to all Black girls	Advice that Starr’s mother and father gave to her in high school in tandem with the advice that my parents gave me when I was in high school.	<i>The Hate U Give</i> by T  <i>Between the World and</i>
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Table 1.2 Multi-Genre Graphic Organizer

### The Notes Page

The multi-genre graphic organizer acts as a scaffold for the five writing genres and provides information for the notes page. The notes page explains the students’ ideas to write the genre and includes the information gleaned from the research used for writing the piece. This section, the notes page, is located after the five writing genres and is similar to "footnotes." For example, Bria explains the backstory to “An Open Letter to Black Girls.” She writes:

I wanted to shine a light on a vital, often unheard voice: Black girls in this writing genre. The advice given in this letter was inspired by all of the advice that Starr's mother and father gave her throughout the novel. Especially when talking about her race or her civic duty to be a voice for Khalil. This open letter includes advice that was also inspired by things my grandmother, mother, and many aunts have always told me. Even though I didn't believe them growing up, I realize now how valuable and special these affirmations of love and support truly are. In writing this letter, I released many feelings I have had about my experiences with racial oppression.

### Teaching Mini-lessons within the MGP Writing Process

As the students read their texts, have small group discussions, and brainstorm using their graphic organizers, the teacher plans mini-lessons to teach skills and processes and to scaffold the writing process throughout the eight weeks. Using Kittle's (2008) text, *Write Beside Them*, and Gallagher and Kittle's (2018) text, *180 Days*, the mini-lessons included but were not limited to the following for the students: using sensory details, showing and not telling, focusing on word choice and theme, using storyboard techniques, controlling time in a story, zoom in/zoom out, answering the "so what" of the paper, and persuasive and argumentative techniques. In addition to teaching skills and processes within writing, I also designed and taught a three-hour poetry writing workshop. In this workshop, students wrote poems based on the organizing themes of the texts they were reading. I introduced them to examples of different

types of poems, including teaching the circle poem, poems that use personification and two voices, acrostic, and found poetry. These examples served as a model by employing a template of sorts for students to examine before writing their poems. In reading the final MGP submissions, I noticed that most students included at least one of the poems they wrote in the poetry workshop. Below is an example of a poem for two voices written by Bria based on the novel, *The Hate U Give*.

**Garden Heights Starr vs. Williamson Prep Starr**

Garden Heights Starr	Williamson Prep Starr
<p>I'll never give up I'll never be quiet</p> <p>Something to live for, Something to die for.</p> <p>I am not tragically colored I am Black I am woman I am resilient Powerful Unapologetic</p> <p>I am bold beyond measure</p> <p>A hard worker</p> <p>I am strong Because I know how to support my family. Even when I'm not strong myself</p> <p>I have learned that melanin in my skin is beautiful Special Spectacular</p> <p>But most importantly, I have learned That I am enough.</p>	<p>I'll never give up</p> <p>I always have to know when to be quiet</p> <p>Nothing is worth looking like the angry Black girl.</p> <p>I am not tragically colored I am Black I am woman</p> <p>But still, I am tragic to my peers Because my home life is different Because I am different</p> <p>I am careful not to offend anyone Quiet when I have to be</p> <p>A hard worker Because I have to work twice as hard to get half as far</p> <p>I am strong</p> <p>Because I know how to dress accordingly, how to tread the line carefully Between being black enough and acting white enough</p> <p>I often struggle with knowing That I am enough.</p>

Table 1.3 Garden Heights Starr verse Williamson Prep Starr

In this two-voiced poem, Bria shows two sides of Starr's inner thoughts, those of Garden Heights Starr and those of Williamson Prep Starr. The Garden Heights inner voice talks about being proud of her identity and culture as an African American woman and celebrates her newfound voice, while the Williamson Prep inner voice talks more about the struggle for acceptance by her school friends due to her skin color. In this poem, Bria elaborates on the double-consciousness that Starr experiences from being Black in America. The double-consciousness, a term created by Dubois (1989), explains the conflicted inner world of African-Americans due to racialized oppression in a white-dominated society. In reading and writing about Starr's conflicted inner world, Bria discovers through her research and self-reflection in writing that she too has experienced double-consciousness.

### **In Search of a Title**

Just as students must identify a theme to center their writing, they must also create a title for their project different from the title of the novel read. For example, Bria, who read *The Hate U Give*, was inspired to name her project "I am not tragically colored," after reading Zora Neale Hurston's (1928) essay, "What it feels to be colored me." Bria writes:

The most important understanding this project gave me is stated in my title 'I Are Not Tragically Colored.' Before this experience, when I reflected on events that happened throughout my life that I consider unjust and discriminatory, I often felt terrible about them. In reading *The Hate U Give* and reflecting on my life through writing, I realized that these events, though unfair, are part of my identity. Rather than feeling bad, I began to feel empowered. I reflected on my successes and how these events did not stop me from achieving important milestones in my life, such as being a first-generation college student, graduating with a 4.0 from my Master's program, and receiving numerous teaching job offers as a first-year teacher. This MGP assignment was not only empowering to me but also helped me begin healing longstanding wounds.

### **Research in Multi-Genre**

*Kristina*

I used the MGP as an alternative to the traditional research paper in my 11-grade English classroom. I assigned the MGP to my 11th-graders after reading *The Great Gatsby*. In order to add depth to their project, students located a minimum of three references based on a theme. They worked

individually or in groups of two, three, or four and selected specific themes on which to focus: women's roles, fashion, and crime in the 1920s. Students then chose a major character from the novel that would serve as the lens for their research and the basis for their writing genres. Focusing on theme and character as a springboard for research, the students wrote from a different perspective than they would if they were doing a traditional research paper. For example, a group of students studied the inner workings of speakeasies and the details of buying and selling alcohol away from the public eye during Prohibition. As a result of their findings, the students designed a blueprint of an underground speakeasy that Meyer Wolfsheim might have frequented. In having conversations with students about their research on this theme, I concluded that many chose it because it is seen as sensational and transgressive, which is not a typical discussion in my high school classroom. Students cannot often ask questions and research themes in literature that they are deeply interested in, and when given the opportunity, they realized that they had many questions regarding crime and the law both in the 1920s and today. Not only did the MGP allow the students to incorporate their voices through what they chose to convey, but they also enjoyed the learning process without being forced into a research topic that had no relevance for them.

### **Holistic Assessment in Multi-genre**

Giving that the MGP has many sections, it is crucial to discuss holistic assessment. As Gallagher and Kittle (2018) recommend, I, too, wait until students are reading and writing and invested in the multi-genre project before I provide a rubric for them to consider. I am also well aware of how students approach assignments by writing to a rubric, and in the process, many students become stifled and forgo the quick writes, out-of-the-box thinking, and inductive processes that allow for risk-taking, imaginative thinking, and creative thinking expression. Because this project bridges expository writing and creative writing, it is fitting to judge the quality of a student's final product in a complex, holistic way. Like Gallagher and Kittle (2018), I have adapted Romano's (2006) multi-genre project rubric, which keeps the art of reading and writing in the English/language arts curriculum. See Romano's website, [www.users.miamioh.edu/romanots](http://www.users.miamioh.edu/romanots), for his complete multi-genre project rubric.

### **Reflections on Building a Writing Identity**

After students complete the multi-genre project, I ask them to reflect on their learnings. One theme that emerges is that teaching the multi-genre project is effective and powerful in building a writing identity. In doing this project, students have an opportunity to make sense of their lives in school through reading and writing while they learn enduring understandings, skills, and processes outlined in the Virginia Curriculum Frameworks. This two-pronged approach to learning teaches social-emotional and cognitive skills that lay a foundation for future success. What follows are reflections from Kailyn, Bria, and Kristina that solidify the empowering effect of the multi-genre project.

Bria writes that the multi-genre project strengthened my writing identity by reinforcing the importance of vulnerability. When completing this project, I drafted a few genres and never felt satisfied with what I wrote. I quickly realized that never being satisfied was because I was not as vulnerable when addressing such a personal and powerful experience. Once I allowed myself to be vulnerable in my writing, I was proud of my work. Not only did this project strengthen my writing identity, but it also helped me as a beginning teacher create lessons that allowed students to be vulnerable. These lessons include discussions and activities that provide opportunities for students to share their experiences, explore their beliefs, challenge the world around them, and question their place in it.

Kailyn explains that the MGP opened a new world of writing possibilities. It challenged me as a student to explore various forms of writing in a creative way that was informed by literature and research. From building personal connections as a reader and future teacher, I was able to craft writing genres that allowed me to express my identity for the first time fully. I am most proud of my ability to capture my emotions, words, and feelings in a way that paralleled the impactful voices of the characters in the novel. This challenge spurred me to create a clear writing identity that was versatile and powerful.

As a beginning teacher, Kristina writes that I assigned the MGP project to test my students' bravery in expressing themselves and my bravery as a teacher. For students to feel comfortable researching and to choose topics that genuinely interest them, I first had to make them feel comfortable choosing specific topics, such as crime, that would not usually be considered an acceptable topic of study in our high school. While the crime of the 1920s and today, such a murder, robbery, rape, and other types

of criminal activity, have always been a reality, due to the Internet and our school's strict Internet security features, I had to work with the administration to allow students to search the topic of crime on the Internet. In this case, it was my teacher's voice that was asserted instead of my writing voice.

Bria, Kailyn, and Kristina's reflections are supported by hooks (1994), as she believes that teachers must be vulnerable in their classrooms if they ask their students to be vulnerable. Bridging the author's voice with the student's voice, the MGP enhances student writing by showing that reading and writing can be relevant to their own lives and a powerful tool for self-expression. When English/language arts teacher candidates are asked to take risks by writing from the heart about themes in literature that inspire them, they are more likely to ask their middle and high school students to do the same. When teachers provide multi-modal, choice-driven writing assignments that merge expressive writing with expository writing, students have an opportunity to become engaged, motivated, and passionate about writing, thus, building a stronger, more confident writing identity.

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