

University of Missouri-Kansas City-Composition E-Newsletter

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A Note from the Editor

Welcome to Issue 11 of the Composition E-Newsletter. As teachers of writing, we are often looking for opportunities to learn more. After all, remaining a learner is what allows us to be the best possible teachers. In that spirit, this issue features some easy resources and ideas that can help you remain a teacher who is *always* learning. (Which is, of course, a great sort of teacher to be!)

First, **Nicole Higgins** shares a wonderful annotated bibliography that suggests many sources to consider for those that might want to integrate a multigenre project into their curriculum. Then, **Steve Dilks** explains FaCET and the many opportunities available for teachers there. Finally, I discuss how Greg Mortenson, a humanitarian and best-selling author who recently spoke in Kansas City, has something to teach all of us!

Please feel free to contact me with any feedback, questions, or concerns that you may have about this issue. Thanks!

Happy reading,

Lauren Obermark-Assistant Director of Composition

Composition Program Announcements

Teaching Awards for Writing Instructors

All adjunct writing teachers and GTs are invited to apply for the English Department's Sosland Teaching Awards by preparing and submitting teaching portfolios by June 2, 2008.

By preparing a teaching portfolio and applying for a Sosland Teaching Award, you are not suggesting you are THE BEST teacher in the composition program; instead, your portfolio should demonstrate your interest in teaching and your commitment to becoming a reflective practitioner. Your portfolio might contain a statement of your teaching philosophy, sample student papers, typical assignments, student evaluations, excerpts from teaching journals, and just about anything else that you feel best represents your important work in the composition classroom. Teachers who have been recognized in the past have done more than assemble an archive of classroom artifacts; instead, they have demonstrated their efforts to think critically about their own classroom practices.

Deborah Minter and Amy Goodburn's book on teaching portfolios, *Composition, Pedagogy, and the Scholarship of Teaching*, offers wonderful suggestions about constructing a teaching portfolio. Copies are on closed reserve at Miller Nichols Library. Check under Jane Greer's name at the circulation desk.

The portfolios of experienced and new teachers (less than two years in the classroom) will be evaluated in separate categories. Awards may be as high as \$1000.

Applause, Applause for UMKC's Representatives to this Year's CCCC in New Orleans

UMKC will again be well represented at this year's Conference on College Composition and Communication in New Orleans. **Muffy Guilfoil, Kristin Huston, Cynthia Knight, Katie Manning, and Henri Rix Wood** will be presenting papers. **Lauren Obermark** will be presenting her work-in-progress at the Research Network Forum. This year's travel grant recipients for teachers not appearing on the program are **Melissa Hicks** and **Glenn North**. Congratulations to all these teachers!

Look for articles in the next issue of our e-newsletter from these great teachers about their CCCC experience, and in late April, the Composition Program will host a workshop on preparing CCCC proposals for next year's conference in San Francisco.

Choose Your Own Adventure: An Annotated Bibliography

By: Nicole Higgins (guilfoilm@umkc.edu)

The "choose your own adventure" spirit of the multigenre approach to writing allows students to present their best possible work. By asking them to create reflective representations of topics that hold personal or societal weight, multigenre writing positions itself as a powerful vehicle for agency and student success in the composition classroom.

Davis, Robert and Mark Shadle. "Building a Mystery": Alternative Research Writing and the Academic Act of Seeking." *College Composition and Communication* 51.3 (2000), 417-46.

Davis and Shadle reject the modernist notion of the research paper as reporting in favor of work that focuses instead on inquiry and exploration. They provide a detailed survey of alternative assignments: the research argument, the personal research paper, the research essay, and the multi-genre/media/disciplinary/cultural research project. They detail successful projects completed by students at Eastern Oregon University (as influenced by multigenre proponent Tom Romano). They believe that incorporating these alternatives can help to cut down on the prevalence of plagiarism and begin to chip away at the false dichotomies that exist within academia.

Grierson, Sirpa T. "Circling through Text: Teaching Writing through Multigenre Writing." *The English Journal* 89.1 (1999), 51-55.

Grierson provides a practical how-to of the multigenre format, describing what it is, how to incorporate it into the classroom, and what makes it a useful avenue for exploring and helping students retain the skills associated with writing. She shares an activity for introducing the multigenre concept in which students are given a current event to respond to, then discuss as a class the varied responses to the same material, which work together to form a "collage" of

information. Students share their positive reactions to the challenge of working outside the framework of the traditional and familiar essay form. Grierson also discusses the grading rubric used for the assignment, which includes guidelines established by the students to foster a sense of ownership of their projects.

Larson, Richard. "The 'Research Paper' in the Writing Classroom: A Non-form of Writing." *College English* 44 (1982), 811-16.

Larson advocates an expanded notion of research, explaining that, just as the gathering of information can encompass a variety of process, so should the presentation of findings incorporate a variety of formats. He claims that the university is riddled with contradictory notions of what constitutes academic research; as such, teachers of writing often de-emphasize the importance of "humanistic" means of gathering and interpreting information. He concludes that they must be realistic about their limitations in accommodating the requirements of field-specific research; because these requirements are so diverse, the research paper cannot and should not serve as a standard, universal format.

LeNoir, W. David. "The Multigenre Warning Label." *The English Journal* 92.2 (2002), 99-101.

LeNoir emphasizes the importance of unity in multigenre writing, citing the lack thereof as the most common potential downfall of what can otherwise provide a rich learning experience for students. He explains that, when contemplating how to present their ideas, students should aim for genres that can work together cohesively, because the simple assembly of random components with no connection outside of subject-based content does not sufficiently accomplish the goals of the multigenre project.

---. "The Ins, Outs, and In-Betweens of Multigenre Writing." *The English Journal* 92.2 (2002), 91-98.

Mack argues that the multigenre format allows students to bring their best efforts to the work they do in the writing classroom by requiring a greater depth of engagement with sources and allowing students to tap in to both the expressive and practical potential of the practice of writing. She states that too much emphasis on form takes the inventiveness and discovery out of writing, making it a "mechanical, mindless task." Her students complete five-genre projects that must incorporate some sort of folkloric undercurrent. She finds that the process forces them to: perform critical analysis to establish a strong foundation, consider their responsibilities in representing their findings, and consider how to use cross-disciplinary overlap to showcase their individual strengths.

Romano, Tom. *Blending Genre, Altering Style*. Portsmouth, NH: Boynton/Cook, 2000.

Romano offers a firsthand glimpse of the possibilities available through the multigenre format with the setup of this book, including with each idea he presents an example of its successful execution in a student project. He discusses students' general lack of interest in their scholarly work, and positions multigenre writing as a solution to this epidemic. He points out that the

preparation of multigenre projects require just as much work as traditional research forms, and that the work must be taken a step further because students are not merely regurgitating their findings; they must creatively engage with them to produce thoughtful, cohesive, meaningful projects.

---. *Writing with Passion: Life Stories, Multiple Genres*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 1995.

Romano explains how to teach multigenre research and writing in this seminal book. He describes his first trial of the multigenre paper with high school seniors assigned to research a famous person, then creatively represent his/her life. Using several personal accounts, he argues that the multigenre approach stretches students and cultivates in them passionate engagement with their work. He demonstrates the effectiveness multigenre writing can have by including "interludes" between the chapters and offering specific ideas that can be readily integrated into writing curricula.

Slack, Delane Bender. "Fusing Social Justice with Multigenre Writing." *The English Journal* 90.6 (2001), 62-66.

Slack describes how she uses multigenre projects to inspire social agency in her students. She believes that teachers have a responsibility to "humanize students" by offering them a number of methods to express themselves in a productive manner. She incorporates her "political agenda based on equality, empathy, and optimism" by having her students prepare multigenre projects centered around a social movement of their choosing. She details the structure of the project and includes positive student responses. Her students demonstrate a new understanding of their scholarly work as meaning making; thus, they are able to create projects of immediate relevancy and reflect on them with passionate depth.

Fascinating FaCET!

By: Steve Dilks (dilkss@umkc.edu)

The Faculty Center for Excellence in Teaching (FaCET) is faculty defined and operated with a focus on promoting academic excellence by facilitating student-centered pedagogies and practices.

The Center sponsors forums for the discussion of teaching practices and is open to all teachers at UMKC. The Center is a hub for existing UMKC programs that emphasize student learning and it is a gathering-place for those committed to the improvement of their own teaching as well as those committed to the scholarship of teaching and learning.

Recent events have focused on Teaching with Technology, Academic Freedom and Inclusion, International Programs for Faculty and Students, Teaching with Writing, and "What's New at the Library?" In the next few weeks we are running sessions on Gender in the Classroom, Political Correctness, Teaching with "Blackboard," and the Politics of Literary. The FaCET Symposium will be held on May 2, 2008. We are currently working to develop a Student

Advisory Group to provide advice about FaCET programming and are seeking nominations (the committee would convene four times a semester; participants would receive a \$100 credit-card).

You are invited to participate in our events and are welcome to propose presentations and conversations we might convene. More information is available at <http://go.umkc.edu/facet>. Contact Steve Dilks (dilkss@umkc.edu).

The Necessity of Failure: Applying the Philosophy of Greg Mortenson in My Writing Classroom

By: Lauren Obermark (laurenobermark@umkc.edu)

On March 4, I had the wonderful opportunity to see Greg Mortenson, the best-selling author of *Three Cups of Tea*, speak at Wyandotte High School. Unassuming and humble, Mortenson told the story of how his failed attempt to climb K2 led him to build schools throughout Pakistan and Afghanistan. When building his schools, Mortenson especially emphasizes the importance of educating girls, often quoting the African proverb, “If you educate a boy you educate an individual. If you educate a girl, you educate a village.” Several composition teachers at UMKC have used *Three Cups of Tea* as their book-length text for English 225 and, even more, all teachers can certainly find something inspiring in his work and story.

As I listened to Mortenson speak, what especially struck me was that he emphasized failure as being a large part of what has led to his success. Mortenson claims people must acknowledge failures to learn and, eventually, succeed. Again, he quotes a proverb to eloquently make this point: “When it is dark, you can see the stars.”

By 2007, Mortenson had opened more than sixty schools, and he has forty more in the works. Though impressive and inspiring, hearing of such immense success can make one assume it had always been that way for Mortenson. But the road has been long and difficult for him, and he continues to face challenges. He initially traveled to Pakistan to climb K2 in memory of his sister who had recently died. He did not make it to the top, though. This failure brought him to a remote Pakistani village, where a young girl asked him to build them a school. After this, he struggled to raise money, writing hundreds of letters to celebrities and receiving only one donation. Once he did raise the money, notably depending on the community rather than celebrities, he returned to Pakistan to learn that he needed to raise *more* money so he could a bridge allowing people to get to the school—yet another hardship. As he worked to build this first school, he struggled to manage the construction process, eventually having to let the community take the lead rather than micromanage the project. After all these challenges and failures, the school was built, and children who previously had no access to education now were able to learn. Currently, while building new schools, Mortenson strives to convince different villages that they would benefit from education, and that girls deserve this education, too. He also receives threats and resistance from his fellow Americans who disagree with his work in Afghanistan. Despite all this, though, Mortenson perseveres and works harder. To put it simply, through this darkness, he sees the stars and continues to reach for them.

Though my work as a writing teacher is not exactly comparable to Mortenson’s humanitarian efforts, I found myself considering how I could learn from his work and apply it to my classroom. This is where his emphasis on the necessity of failure grabbed my attention. As a

teacher, I am obsessed with failure: Are my students learning? Is their writing improving? What can I do to bounce back from a disastrous class period? Yes, at times I think I fail on a daily basis. Mortenson encouraged me to view these failures as opportunities and to think about how they might actually build up to moments of great success. Perhaps I am not building schools, but I am doing something I believe in passionately. In this way, Mortenson certainly renewed my faith as an educator and inspired me to try new things when teaching writing. After all, if things do not work as perfectly as planned, there still could be much to learn from my failure.

For more information about Greg Mortenson and his nonprofit organization, the Central Asia Institute, or to buy the book, please visit threecupsoftea.com.

Department Calendar

Please visit the English department website for the calendar of current events:
www.umkc.edu/english/calander.

Interested in Contributing to the Next E-Newsletter?

For the upcoming issue, we are looking for contributions dealing with teaching exercises, pedagogy, student interactions, current research, upcoming conference presentations, and any other issues relevant to the composition program. We are especially interested in giving a voice to adjunct faculty. Please contact Lauren Obermark at laurenobermark@umkc.edu for more information.