Multiple Genres, Multiple Voices
Teaching Argument in Composition and Literature
Cheryl L. Johnson and Jayne A. Moneysmith

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In the 100 plus years since the research paper—or “source theme”—was first introduced as a distinct genre of student writing, the assignment has been driving people nuts. “Let’s talk about the research paper,” writes one college instructor as she introduces this subject to her readers in a journal article, “… granted, a dispiriting proposal. But although it bores everybody damn near to death, a great many college courses … have a RESEARCH PAPER embedded in them like a stone. And we all hate it.” Much of the scholarship on teaching the assignment begins with a similar apology, complaint, or tale of woe. Of course, students, when asked, have their own familiar odious views of the research paper. They see it as a rite of passage, a form of punishment, the kind one endures because it’s supposed to be good for you.

This is a view shared by many of their instructors. It was certainly mine for many years, until I detected something seriously wrong with the research papers my students wrote for me. It wasn’t that they were boring, though they often were. It wasn’t that they were written, as one of my colleagues put it, as if “there was no one home.” No, what really bothered me was that they were an empty performance, much like the musical in which my daughter appeared at Camp Crescendo this summer that featured corny music about how wonderful it was to be at Camp Crescendo. Everybody dutifully sang, but with every word they began to realize they believed none of it. For many students, academic writing inspires a similar lack of conviction. Writing a research paper, one student told me, is like “an atheist going to church.”

Over the years, instructors reacted to this problem in different ways. In the fifties, there was something called the “controlled research paper.” Publishers churned out books on mostly famous authors or canonical texts that contained all the research a student might need—essays by experts, reviews, interviews, profiles—and students simply dined at the buffet they provided, writing their papers without a trip to the library. In the sixties, there was a move to abolish the research paper altogether from composition courses. In the seventies, Ken Macrorie led a minor revolution and proposed something called the “I-Search” paper, an alternative to the conventional research paper that still enjoys a loyal following. Though the traditional, argumentative,
thesis-support research paper still holds sway in writing textbooks, the last several decades have inspired other approaches, including the ethnographic essay, the inquiry-based research essay, and the multi-genre paper. All of these alternatives attempt to address the Camp Crescendo problem: How can we turn the research assignment into a meaningful intellectual exercise rather than an empty exercise of “research skills”?

Critics of these alternatives to the conventional research paper complain that they fail to give students practice with argumentative writing, or that they aren’t intellectually rigorous, or that they won’t help them write traditional papers for other classes. Even some students have their suspicions. If writing a multigenre research paper is actually fun, can it be serious academic work?

What’s so important about the book you hold in your hands is that it persuasively and compellingly argues that the multivoiced argument (MVA) does the work that we expect a conventional research paper to do—gives students practice with research skills, helps them write well in other academic situations, and challenges them to think deeply—but it does a great deal more. When writing a multivoiced argument, students are much more likely to understand that argumentative writing is an often nuanced, complex, and most of all, adventurous activity. Argument is not simply lining up ducks but discovering the boundaries of the pond and all the competing perspectives it contains. You only have to listen to Cheryl Johnson and Jayne Moneysmith’s students to understand how writing the MVA expands their understanding of argument and research. Here’s what Jen, one of the students whose project is featured in Multiple Genres, Multiple Voices said after writing her MVA: “My experience with argument goes like this: Emotional appeal only takes you so far. Personal experience may be only the basis of an argument, and you must dig much further back to back up your claims. You must string together your claim with character, values, logic, evidence, and emotion.”

Jen’s sophisticated understanding of the nature of argument is impressive; it includes all the elements of the rhetorical triangle—pathos, logos, and ethos—and it represents a shift in her own thinking, inspired by her MVA on eating disorders. As a young woman who suffered from eating disorders herself, Jen was initially inclined to see her argument in largely emotional terms. That’s no surprise. But she later managed to write a multigenre paper that went beyond her own strong feelings about the problem, and as a result was more effective. While Jen’s MVA challenged her to employ logos, as well as pathos, in her argument about the causes of eating disorders, this never lessened her engagement with the paper. “This project has me mesmerized,” she writes, “...I enjoyed every second of it.” This is powerful testimony
to the impact the MVA pedagogy can have on students’ understanding of research, argument, and themselves as active agents who can contribute to public discourse.

The authors of *Multiple Genres, Multiple Voices* anticipate other criticisms leveled at alternatives to the conventional research paper. While it’s true that students are currently not likely to be assigned multigenre papers in other classes, Johnson and Moneysmith want to change that paradigm, noting that a multigenre project provides students with a rich rhetorical experience across a broad spectrum of classes from composition and literature to history, psychology, communication, and anthropology. No matter the subject area, students are challenged to choose genres for specific purposes and for specific audiences, and as they struggle to define these, they not only get practice writing for multiple audiences but also gain a much richer understanding of what they’re writing about. “Two types of learning took place as I worked on my MVA,” wrote Melanie, whose MVA focused on Margaret Atwood’s novel *The Handmaid’s Tale*. “First of all, there was the knowledge I gained about different issues in America, such as censorship and the religious right. Secondly, and more importantly, I learned to enjoy and respect the idea of the MVA. . . I had some experiences with multigenre writing before, and I didn’t consider the projects that I (or my classmates) did to be “academic” enough. . . Once I realized that I had probably done twice as much research for my MVA as I usually do for a traditional paper, I dismissed the idea that the MVA wasn’t academic!”

These student testimonials—and the projects students share in *Multiple Genres, Multiple Voices*—convinced me that the authors have indeed made a major new contribution to the discussion about how to teach research-based writing. As promised, they have built on the important pioneering work on multigenre writing by Tom Romano, and extended it in new and exciting ways. The authors, who compare the MVA to a Miles Davis tune—both “improvised and structured”—have brought to the teaching of argument a lively riff that will enliven my classroom. *Multiple Genres, Multiple Voices* will be welcomed, too, by many other writing teachers whose students see argument or research as singing a song they don’t have to believe in.

Bruce Ballenger
Chapter One

Multivoiced Argument: A New View

The hardest part about writing a paper is figuring out what to write about. . . . As long as you know the formula (strong intro/strong conclusion, paragraphs in the middle all supporting your thesis) and you, as the writer, make it sound as if you completely believe your argument, then the reader will be convinced, too. (Of course, you don’t have to actually believe your argument. You don’t even have to care about your argument. You just have to sound like you do.)

Melanie

Melanie’s analysis may sound all too familiar. It is the confession of a good writer, one who has learned strategies for writing the successful argumentative essay but approaches it as a game, a matter of filling in the formal requirements without having the slightest personal investment or ethical conviction.

We see writers who are disinterested and disengaged from their texts as a serious problem in our classrooms. We’ve read through stacks of papers that make the expected moves in academic discourse, but the writers are absent. They cite the opinions of researchers with an occasional I think or in my opinion added. Such students aren’t engaged with their texts.
This was Karen’s experience before she wrote her first multivoiced argument:

I enjoyed research papers because they were easy and basically a no-brainer . . . anyone can write a research paper because somebody already wrote it for you. You grab from everyone else and piece it together and end up with a piece that sounds like a textbook with little or no personal “pizzazz” by the writer. At least this way [writing a multivoiced argument] I can say, yes, I have pieces of information I gathered from others but it is ALL MY PAPER—my personality is in there, and I worked very hard on it.

Karen

Karen’s “personal pizzazz” enlivens her argument and assures a more writerly connection to her text. It redefines the kind of argument she presents and reflects our own view of argumentation. In our effort to revamp potentially mind-numbing assignments, we’ve developed a new approach to argumentative discourse that we call the Multivoiced Argument (MVA). We’ve adapted research on multigenre writing, including the groundbreaking work of Tom Romano, to the rigors of the college classroom, which has traditionally viewed the argumentative essay as the default genre.

We do not advocate abandoning the traditional argumentative essay. We still teach it ourselves, and our students frequently include it as one of their genres in an MVA, or even construct MVAs that consist exclusively of traditional essays written from different points of view. We are aware that there are many definitions of argument and approaches to teaching argument. But this is not a book about the nature of argument. It is a book that presents a method of teaching argument that is flexible and adaptable, and it has helped our students engage their topics. We’re aware that the goals of a particular course, the philosophy of a given program, or mandates by a writing director, department chair, or colleagues may make the MVA inappropriate. But in many situations the MVA is not only an appropriate but an outstanding option.

In an MVA, writers create an argument that explores alternative perspectives by using multiple genres written from different points of view. Genres might include a letter, a dialogue, a report, or even a poem—in addition to the traditional essay. Students bolster their argument with research that is reflected within these genres, creating an organic whole, though that “whole” may not be linear. By combining an array of voices with the rigor of scholarship, the MVA offers a fresh and powerful approach to research as argument.

An extended example will demonstrate both what the MVA is and how it differs from traditional argumentative research papers. Let’s
assume that a student is writing on establishing funding priorities for AIDS research. After extensive reading, she decides that federal funding of AIDS research should be radically increased. In a traditional research-based argument, she would marshal facts to support her point of view. Paraphrasing what the “opposition” thinks, she would try to identify flaws in their reasoning while championing her own point of view. Ideally, all her paragraphs would relate to her main point. This can be a fine way to compose an argument, although it often produces a fatigued and predictable piece of writing.

Were this same student to write a multivoiced argument, she would present her argument differently by including various viewpoints in genres that best express them. Though she would still write the entire argument herself, she would adopt different personas and use a host of perspectives to convince her audience that funding for AIDS research should be dramatically increased. For emotional appeal, she might present diary entries written in the voice of a person with AIDS, or letters this person wrote to a close friend or family member. She might write newsletter articles for a nonprofit organization dedicated to AIDS research, letters to the editor, or fictionalized interviews with AIDS researchers. But her freedom to choose among various genres and perspectives does not mean the approach lacks rigor. On the contrary, the author assumes responsibility for meeting both academic and cultural expectations associated with each selected genre. Each reflects the extensive research she has done. By expressing her arguments in varied genres such as testimony before Congress, articles in a professional journal, or a televised debate, the author must think hard about differing viewpoints.

The different types of writing she produces would not result in a haphazard collage or a loosely connected portfolio of work. They would be aimed at a specific audience, which she would define, and they would work together to convey a central, significant point. For example, she could address members at a Congressional hearing, and she could design all her pieces as different types of testimony. This emphasis on audience in the MVA leads students to develop a richer understanding of argumentation. After having taught the MVA in different classes and in different variations, we often hear from students that until they wrote an MVA, they never understood the concept of audience or why it was important in an argument. Writing a multivoiced argument gives students a chance to experience argument as inquiry, a process that leads to exploring, testing, and discussing, rather than focusing on winning a case.

We have found that using multiple voices and genres makes writing researched arguments more engaging. This pedagogy has transformed many students, making them care about their writing, sometimes for
the first time in their lives. Melanie, for example (see Appendix A), ini-
tially resisted writing an argument without using a traditional “for-
mula.” But once she understood what the MVA was all about, she
became so immersed in her project that her professor had trouble get-
ting her to stop.

MVA: A Pedagogy Whose Time Has Come

The traditional argumentative model often focuses on finding holes
in the “opposition’s” argument. While this may be necessary, we are
presenting a more varied approach, one that privileges care, connec-
tion, cooperation and autonomy and so avoids a risk of traditional
argument—silencing the opposition. In emphasizing inquiry as the
goal of argument as opposed to “justifying a stance already believed,”
John T. Gage (1996) observes that “students who believe that they
are being taught to argue to prevail over opponents in situations of
conflict may believe in consequence that this end justifies any rhetor-
cical practice that leads to winning over or silencing another” (5). To
encourage more cooperation and less attention on finding an oppo-
nent’s weak spot, we redefine debate as dialogue. But we are aware
that keeping the peace does not necessarily mean avoiding conflict.

We are not alone in calling for changes in how to view argument. For
example, Catherine E. Lamb (1996) in “Feminist Responses to
Argument” states that “techniques of mediation and negotiation pro-
vide concrete ways to resolve conflict when the goal is no longer win-
ning but finding a solution in a fair way” (261). The MVA effectively
frames such arguments because writers can explore several solutions
without favoring one over the other. Instead, writers present substan-
tial information from different perspectives so that the readers can
judge which solution best meets their needs. Perhaps the writers will
delay the thesis until the end and argue for one solution over the other,
but only after they have thoroughly presented a range of solutions to
the problem.

Paul Heilker (1996) has argued that our allegiance to the thesis/
support model is “developmentally, epistemologically, and ideologically
inadequate” (7). Students who choose this “default drive for exposito-
ary writing” (2) often compose simplistic and safe thesis statements
instead of comprehensive and subtle ones. Choosing a simple thesis
can make students adopt a voice that ignores or glosses over personal
or multivocal perspectives their topics embrace. We have even had stu-
dents ask us if it is OK to ignore research that does not support their
thesis. MVA writers learn how to win over their readers, not by pre-
senting a crisp thesis and lining up reasons and support, like soldiers
standing at attention, but by creating a rich text that respects the complexity of a topic. Likewise, readers of an MVA feel not acted on or won over but challenged to work through an issue or problem.

We want our students to explore their emerging positions rather than move too quickly to stating a position and supporting it. Such an approach to argument reflects how Pamela Annas and Deborah Tenney (1996) see their students arguing effectively in their classrooms:

This approach invites students to ground argument in personal experience and belief, to be inclusive of and receptive to alternative viewpoints, to steer a middle way between silence and the assumption of expertise, to be self-reflective and honest about their own assumptions, to keep in mind the material conditions out of which opinions arise and in which they are heard, and to consider their audience as perhaps coworkers toward truth rather than as opponents, dupes, or a row of tabulae rasae.” (135)

Our students experiment with several approaches to argument and learn that how writers present their claims not only influences the audience’s response but also shapes the writers’ text.

In “Broadening the Repertoire: Alternatives to the Argumentative Edge,” Barry M. Kroll (2000) describes three such approaches—conciliatory, integrative, and deliberative. These approaches resist the agonistic approach to argument and explore different ways for the writer to show that he understands opposing views, can mediate disputes, and discover solutions that will work. The tension in such arguments is related less to who is winning and more to what’s at stake and why. We’ve found that using multiple genres and voices in such arguments has a profound influence on readers and reshapes the rhetorical identity of the writers.

Elisabeth Leonard’s (1997) question, “How can I give my students the skills in reading and writing they will need in the academy without denying them the pleasure of becoming an Author?” highlights the importance of experimenting (222). Her answer is to broaden the range of texts in academic discourse and make room for what she calls “fragmented or ruptured” writing (225). Lillian Bridwell-Bowles (1992) suggests that students should write in genres that stretch the boundaries of academic essays. She favors a “diverse discourse” in which alternative writing is placed alongside formal academic arguments (350). Others have taken up Bridwell-Bowles’ call. In the past few years, there has been renewed interest in “alt/dis” and in variations of multigenre and multivocal writing. (See, for example, Freedman and Medway 1994; Bishop 1997; Bishop and Ostrom 1997; Romano 1995, 2000, 2004; Davis and Shadle 2000; Allen 2001; Starkey 2001; Schroeder, Fox, and Bizzell 2002.)
We urge instructors to push the boundaries by having students engage multiple genres, “not as ‘special’ events, things done after the basics” (Bishop 1997, 16) but as significant parts of the curricula. Like Bishop, we don’t see this as an either/or issue but as a both/and issue. In Bishop’s words, we’re “putting the traditional and experimental in dialogue so that we learn about convention making and breaking, who is doing what, in what manner, and why” (13).

In an MVA, the writer takes on different roles but leaves explicit connections that help readers navigate through the sea of voices. The authority of a text rests on two things: engaged readers and conscious writers. The bottom line: constructing an MVA is not like a war but a dance of contrasting yet connected voices.

Practicalities: Fitting the MVA into Our Current Curriculum

The two most common questions people ask us about the MVA are closely related: (1) Can I still meet departmental and university standards when teaching the MVA? and (2) Will the MVA help prepare my students for writing in other classes, such as philosophy, anthropology, or biology? Our answer to both questions is a resounding “yes!”

Though the specific standards that teachers need to meet vary from university to university, we believe that the MVA helps students achieve the core goals shared by the majority of our profession. For example, the standards adopted by the Council of Writing Program Administrators (WPA)—a group composed of administrators from a wide range of programs and institutions—can all be met through teaching the MVA. The “WPA Outcomes Statement for First-Year Composition,” adopted in the year 2000, identifies four categories of student achievement, which bear a striking similarity to the aims of the MVA. The “Rhetorical Knowledge” category is especially significant, as this excerpt from the standards shows:

By the end of first year composition, students should be able to:

- Focus on a purpose
- Respond to the needs of different audiences
- Respond appropriately to different kinds of rhetorical situations
- Use conventions of format and structure appropriate to the rhetorical situation
- Adopt appropriate voice, tone, and level of formality
- Understand how genres shape reading and writing
- Write in several genres
In an MVA students write—and think—in different perspectives. Doing so gives them insight into responding to the needs of different audiences, responding to different rhetorical situations, using conventions of format and structure appropriate to the rhetorical situation, and adopting appropriate voice, tone, and level of formality—all identified as desired outcomes by the WPA. Particularly important to our discussion are the guidelines on genre: “Understand how genres shape reading and writing,” and “Write in several genres.” Assigning essays exclusively limits students’ opportunities to develop the range of skills they need. Writing only argumentative essays won’t teach students to write in different genres, just as reading financial reports won’t teach them to read poetry.

An instructor teaching in a given program may have to fulfill requirements that are quite different from the WPA standards but striving to develop students’ critical thinking skills is a pervasive goal throughout higher education. The MVA excels in developing critical thinking skills. Any writing or literature course that stresses critical thinking skills can assign an MVA, even as a major portion of the grade. Multivocal writing requires a more self-reflective and purposeful approach than the traditional essay. Writers must think about several rhetorical requirements: the needs of their audience; the exact language to use; the types of research they need and how to use them; and writing strategies that best suit their purposes. Overall, the MVA makes students better equipped to deal with questions to which there is no easy or readily discernible answer. This kind of knowledge helps students succeed not only in the university but also in their careers.

We also believe that writing the MVA better prepares students for writing in other university courses. When we teach upper-level writing or literature courses—any course beyond first-year composition—we find that the most successful students are those who have the most highly developed critical thinking skills and the widest range of writing skills. These students have become self-aware about the processes of writing and constructing an argument.

Claims that alternative writing does not prepare students for other classes overlook one vital point: student writing in many majors is not confined to writing traditional research essays. In fact, many experts believe that students need to write in a variety of genres throughout the curriculum. For example, Art Young (2003), who helped develop the writing-across-the-curriculum programs at Michigan Technological University and Clemson University, advocates the use of poetry writing in many disciplines. He has found that writing a poem “provides a way into disciplinary discussions in which the writers’ own poetic language engages, recasts, and critiques disciplinary knowledge without having to conform to the conventions of what to them is often an alien
discourse” or a “formula” they too willingly “mimic” (475). Such genre experiments with poetry deepen students’ understanding.

In addition, the writing that students will do after graduation is highly varied. Lawyers write persuasive briefs even when the facts and the law are not favorable. Marketing executives write ads to appeal to various emotions. This is why so many majors now require a course beyond first-year composition devoted to writing in the discipline. It is impossible to expose students to every type of document they will write in the future, nor should we try. What we should do is expose them to a wide range of genres and techniques that have wide applicability and that hone their critical thinking skills. We believe that writing in multiple voices and genres makes it more likely that students will be able to meet writing challenges in other courses and in their chosen professions. Ultimately, the rationale for teaching the MVA boils down to common sense: students learn more because they write more than one type of document and must engage in more varied intellectual activities.

Transforming Writers Through the MVA

When asked to compare her writing of arguments before and after her MVA on eating disorders, student-writer Liz drew a picture of herself as a donkey that refused to budge for her master. A second frame showed the same donkey, chewing on grass, listening to the conversation of her companion. On the back of this picture, Liz wrote:

I started out set in my opinion, armed with personal experiences and full of emotion. However, the more I read, and the more information I got my hands on, the more I began to question my prior ideas. I saw that perhaps there were other factors behind eating disorders than simply the media and fashion industry. The biological studies opened my eyes and forced me to stretch my writing to include these findings. Throughout the semester, I juggled back and forth between the two, trying to decipher which one I believe in more. . . . Amongst all of the deliberations and questioning, [I realized] I didn’t have to decide which side I wanted to be on, I could be on both. I concluded that there is no way to lift the blame completely from the media, but no way could I discount the growing number of studies done on the biological side of this disease. I had compromised. In my first paper I defined my stubbornness as one of my major shortcomings. Looking back, I realize that throughout my suffering, I evolved. I no longer believe there is only one right answer (and that answer has to be mine) or one right way to do things, and this I believe is what I will take with me from the multigenre assignment for the rest of my days.
Many of our students have reflected similarly on their experiences. We have even had students completely change their point of view once they truly understood the other side of the argument. On the whole, students tell us that constructing a multivoiced argument helped them sift through the various perspectives on a topic and made them consider viewpoints they once dismissed too quickly or ignored. That is reason enough for us to keep assigning multivoiced arguments: students learn to expand and deepen their thinking.

Experimenting with different genres and voices lets students step outside the box, understand other perspectives, and invest themselves in their own writing. One student discovered for the first time what it means to write for an audience and not simply for a grade:

Not only have I learned fifty times more than I previously knew about depression, I also helped someone else come to terms with their depression and decide to find help through their reading of my MVA . . . . I was informed that it was my MVA and in particular my narrative of my own fight with depression that convinced them to seek help. From that conversation on, I was no longer concerned with my grade on the MVA to tell me whether or not my work might have been effective.

Griffin

Such transformations reveal a profound change, and we could multiply these testimonies beyond our readers’ tolerance to hear them. We encourage instructors who try our approach to ask their students to tell their stories about writing multivoiced arguments.

What’s Ahead in This Book

In this book we illustrate the MVA by including case studies of two full-length capstone MVAs, that is, MVAs written as final course projects. One MVA is by Jen, Cheryl’s student in a writing course, and the other by Melanie, Jayne’s student in a literature course. Both are reproduced in Appendix A, along with a sample assignment sheet and “Rationale” form. We have chosen complex projects to illustrate the possibilities the MVA offers. Since our approach to teaching the MVA differs from others in the field, even readers who have done some work with multigenre or multivocal projects will profit from perusing these papers. These same two MVAs are used extensively in Chapter 2, where we discuss the processes of writing an MVA—and include the students’ own comments on how they made important decisions about their projects—and in Chapter 4, where we discuss reading, evaluating, and grading MVAs.
Though all chapters fulfill crucial functions, Chapter 2 forms the book’s central core. In this chapter we describe the step-by-step process of writing a capstone MVA, from both the teacher’s and the student’s perspective. We also include specific activities for teaching a capstone MVA in either a writing or a literature course. For teachers who cannot or do not wish to assign a capstone project, Chapter 3 explains how to teach shorter MVAs. In Chapter 4, we show how we read and grade MVAs and give specific criteria for evaluating multivoiced arguments. Following our concluding reflections in Chapter 5, we list and summarize additional sources for teaching multivoiced projects.

Our companion website is an integral part of this book. It includes an extensive collection of materials designed to enhance teaching MVAs, including suggestions for preliminary assignments that set up capstone MVAs, more activities to use in class, shorter capstone projects, assignment sheets, and class handouts. The URL is www.boytoncook.com/multiplegenresmultiplevoices.
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