

Multigenre, Multiple Intelligences, and Transcendentalism

COLLEEN A. RUGGIERI

Ohate math!" I exclaimed to my friends during my junior year of high school. To some of them, it seemed logical, as I was a self-proclaimed lover of English class. After all, we surmised, most people can't love *and* excel in *both* subjects. Unfortunately, as the weeks passed, math class became more and more torturous to me. How could I have gone from absolutely loving the subject to dreading it so much that I got headaches before class? I couldn't do the problems assigned by the teacher, my grade was slipping, and my ego was definitely bruised. In the end, I chose to drop the math class to save my sanity. To

this day I regret it, wondering just how many of life's equations may have been solved by the knowledge gained in that one course.

"You know, you probably could have done those problems if they'd been explained differently," a colleague commented to me, nearly twenty years later. "One of the mistakes in the United States is that people believe that problems can be solved only one way. That's not how the Japanese or other cultures teach subjects, and that's probably why [fewer] people are scared off when it comes to advanced coursework in other countries." Taking these comments to heart, a light went on in my mind. There is truth to the idea that some American classroom practices can actually stifle learning and alienate students. How many times have I heard my students saying, "I don't get this stuff," whether in my high school English class, or in someone else's? How many students, who'd once loved language arts classes in elementary and middle school and who'd appreciated the value of English class, have come to hate it once they've hit high school? Furthermore, how many high school teachers and college professors are not only stuck in the rut of lecturing in order to "cover all the ma-

terial," but also of presenting literature in only one form or from one perspective?

In response to this rhetorical thinking, I decided to transform my eleventh grade American literature classroom, beginning with the unit on Transcendentalism. Like most teachers, I had supplemented the core curriculum containing *Self-Reliance*, *Nature*, *Walden*, and *Civil Disobedience* with other genres, allowing my students to discuss the literature, work cooperatively, and write a variety of responses and papers. However, the unit ultimately ended in the dreaded exam, which was the consummate stumbling block during each class discussion. "Is this going to be on the test?" seemed to be the primary focus of nearly every student. Therefore, in revamping my unit, I set out to achieve two goals. First, I sought a wider variety of supplemental materials and literary connections than what I'd previously been using. Second, I hoped to provide alternative assessment opportunities that would be meaningful and rewarding while delivering authentic results. These goals led me on a journey that ultimately became fulfilling for my students, as well as enlightening and enriching to me as an educator.

Capturing Meaningful Connections through Comics

When seeking new texts to incorporate into the unit, I thought about what might inspire or interest me if I were reading casually or for pleasure. The first idea that came to mind was the *Calvin and Hobbes* comic strip. It seemed as if every time I read this comic, I experienced an epiphany as well as a chuckle. As Kathy Kirk notes in her book, *Writing to Standards*, what is especially appealing about using comics is the fact that they provide a fun way to study voice and that they often make serious statements about politics and culture (14). In order to share the same experience with my students, I headed for the nearest bargain table at my favorite bookseller. Comic creator Bill Watterson has published several collections, including *Something Under the Bed Is Drooling*, *There's Treasure Everywhere*, *The Calvin and Hobbes Tenth Anniversary Book*, *The Indispensable World of Calvin and Hobbes*, and *The Essential Calvin and Hobbes*. In their many adventures, characters Calvin and Hobbes often deliver messages regarding individualism and the environment. Because of this, Watterson's books lend themselves to interesting discussion and analysis, so I purchased a few copies of each title at greatly discounted rates to use in my classroom.

By reading the comic books, my students were able to use this different genre to interpret social commentaries, make connections with works they'd studied in class, and develop their own views on the subjects of individualism, nature, and passive resistance.

After my students and I had read and discussed the four major selections in the Transcendental unit, I put members of the class in cooperative groups of four. I gave each group one or two comic books and fifteen to twenty minutes of class time to read and enjoy the comics, asking them to find connections to the concepts we'd discussed regarding Transcendentalism. Following the allotted reading time, each group shared at least two comics that had strong literary connections to the ideas of Emerson and Thoreau. When sharing the strips, we discussed specific lines from the texts we'd studied that could be connected to the comics. Multiple groups selected two specific comics, and we found that many lines from the Transcendental texts could readily be connected and compared to these particular strips. (See Figure 1.) As a homework assignment, I asked students to locate other examples of comics that would provide literary links to what we'd studied and to bring them to class along with a paragraph of explanation. Within two days, nearly all of the class had finished the assignment. *Peanuts*, *B.C.*, *Family Circus*, and *Crock* were among the many comics collected by students. In the paragraphs accompanying the comics, students analyzed political statements and commentaries in terms of their connections with Transcendental thinking. By reading the comic books, my students were able to use this different genre to interpret social commentaries, make connections with works they'd studied in class, and develop their own views on the subjects of individualism, nature, and passive resistance.

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Making Meaning through Music

In considering another genre that might provide a positive vehicle for learning, I opted for a mode that motivates most everyone I know—music. To introduce the class to the next assignment, I brought in my favorite Frank Sinatra song and discussed the Transcendental ideas contained within the lyrics of “My Way.” I asked my students to consider their own music collections and to bring a song to class—along with the lyrics and a brief paragraph of explanation of the connection between their choice and the ideas we discussed. The response was terrific, and in order to share the excitement, I played portions of each song between classes and for the first two to three minutes each period that I had American literature. As the songs were played, the students who brought them to class shared their rationales with others.

FIGURE 1.
COMICS THAT WERE MOST OFTEN SELECTED BY STUDENTS



(Top panels) from *Something Under the Bed is Drooling* (99). (Bottom panel) from *There's Treasure Everywhere* (9).
CALVIN AND HOBBS © 1988 Watterson. Reprinted with permission of UNIVERSAL PRESS SYNDICATE. All rights reserved.

We also made a chart acknowledging the various titles and artists, as well as the musical genres represented in the selections. (See Table 1.) When reviewing the chart, my students were quick to notice that certain categories, particularly the rock/pop music section, had the most entries. They also noted that they were surprised at how many songs were listed in the country music category, and that we did not have any listings for alternative music, jazz, or heavy metal. Several of the students who were fans of the alternative genre stated that when they listened to the music they had a difficult time choosing songs from this genre because the lyrics seemed “angry” and didn’t appear to be optimistic. However, one student pointed out to the class that, though these songs might not meet that one particular criterion, many alternative musicians are very original and innovative in their approaches to music and songwriting, thus making the actual creation of the music at least partially Transcendental in nature. His response sparked further discussion, as class members saw the call for individualism at work in their own choices of songs.

For example, while two students in the class were Garth Brooks fans, they each chose different songs for the assignment. One student commented further about the song selections in a freewrite at the end of the period:

All of these songs are amazing. I never would have listened to country music before now, because I thought it was a bunch of cry me a river, I lost my girl and truck music. Now I see that the genre is a lot different from what I thought it was. It’s amazing that the messages of individuality and nature are so universal in the music. It makes me realize that what we’re reading in class really does have connections with what we see in real life. It also helps me to learn more about the people in our class. I never would have guessed that some people would have picked the songs they did, and I guess that proves that we don’t always really know each other.

This student’s remark struck a chord with everyone in the classroom when it was shared the next day. Indeed, by adding the musical element to class study

TABLE 1.
EXAMPLES OF STUDENT-SELECTED SONG TITLES AND ARTISTS THAT REFLECT TRANSCENDENTAL THINKING.

Oldies/Classics	Pop/Rock	R&B/Rap	New Age/Classical	Country
Otis Redding: “Sitting on the Dock of the Bay”	Madonna: “Rain” and “Respect Yourself”	R. Kelly: “I Believe I Can Fly”	Enya: “Sail Away”	Dixie Chicks: “Wide Open Spaces”
Louis Armstrong: “What a Wonderful World”	Mariah Carey: “Hero”	Tupac Shakur: “Keep Ya Head Up”	Cranberries: “Copy Cat”	Lee Ann Womack: “I Hope You Dance”
Billy Joel: “Just the Way You Are”	Dave Matthews Band: “Cry Freedom”	Destiny’s Child: “Survivor”	Tim Janis: “Water’s Edge”	Billy Gilman: “Hero”
Frank Sinatra: “My Way”	U2: “Beautiful Day”	Desiree: “You Gotta Be”	Vivaldi: “Four Seasons”	Garth Brooks: “The River” and “We Shall Be Free”
Grateful Dead: “Liberty”	Van Halen: “Dreams”	Jennifer Lopez: “I’m Real”	Yanni: “Rain Must Fall”	Norman Blake: “You Are My Sunshine”
Bob Marley: “Get Up, Stand Up”	Creed: “Higher”	Janet Jackson: “Clouds”	Handel: “Water Music Suite, No.2 for orchestra in D major”	Martina McBride: “Independence Day”
Beatles: “Here Comes the Sun”	Dido: “My Life”	India Arie: “Video”	Modest Mussorgsky: “Night on Bald Mountain, A, for orchestra”	Trisha Yearwood: “Real Live Woman”
Bob Dylan: “Blowin’ in the Wind”	Jewel: “Hands”	Jermaine Jackson: “Rise to the Occasion”		Tim McGraw: “Place in the Sun”
Joni Mitchell: “Big Yellow Taxi”	Backstreet Boys: “Shining Star”	En Vogue: “Free Your Mind”		Jo Dee Messina: “Burn”
Three Dog Night: “Joy to the World”	Bon Jovi: “My Life”			Rascal Flatts: “Prayin’ for Daylight”
	Vanessa Williams: “Colors of the Wind”			
	Michael Jackson: “Earth Song”			
	Whitney Houston: “One Moment in Time”			
	Sting: “Fields of Gold”			

and discussion, students thought more about the curriculum, as well as its relevance in their world.

Making Meaning with Free Reading

Once we finished the comic and music activities, I blocked out time for a free reading unit in order to expose students to even more genres. I gave students the class period each day to read, and their homework assignments consisted of journal responses to

the works that they'd read. Their journals were not due for two weeks, which allowed for more reading time outside of class. I required each student to read selections from three genres, though no one was required to finish more than one entire work within the timeframe of the actual assignment. In helping to guide students' choices, I provided them with a list of titles for their consideration. (See Table 2.) However, they were free to find other works, provided that they showed me their materials in advance

TABLE 2.
SELECTED MULTIGENRE READINGS FOR AN AMERICAN LITERATURE TRANSCENDENTALISM UNIT.

Art/Photography	Poetry	Nonfiction	YA Lit. & Picture Books
Cunningham, Antonia. <i>Essential Impressionists</i> . Bath, England: Parragon, 2000.	Anderson, L. and Marty Asher, eds. <i>Sisters of the Earth: Women's Prose and Poetry About Nature</i> . New York: Vintage, 1991.	Dillard, Annie. <i>Pilgrim at Tinker Creek</i> . New York: HarperCollins, 1998.	Anderson, Laurie Halse. <i>Speak</i> . New York: Puffin, 1999.
Goldsworthy, Andy. <i>Andy Goldsworthy: A Collaboration with Nature</i> . New York: Harry Abrams, 1990.	Bosselaar, Laure-Anne, ed. <i>Urban Nature: Poems about Wildlife in the City</i> . Minneapolis: Milkweed Editions, 2000.	Erlich, Gretel. <i>A Match to the Heart: One Woman's Story of Being Struck by Lightning</i> . New York: Penguin, 1995.	Avi. <i>Blue Heron</i> . New York: Simon & Schuster, 1992.
Hassrick, Peter, ed. <i>The Georgia O'Keeffe Museum</i> . New York: Harry Abrams, 1997.	Farrell, Kate. <i>Art and Nature: An Illustrated Anthology of Nature Poetry, Vol. I</i> . New York: Little, Brown & Company, 1992.	Henley, Don, and Dave Marsh, eds. <i>Heaven Is Under Our Feet</i> . New York: Berkley Publishing Group, 1992.	Carter, Forrest. <i>The Education of Little Tree</i> . Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2000.
House, John. <i>Monet: Nature into Art</i> . New Haven: Yale University Press, 1986.	Ferra, Lorraine. <i>A Crow Doesn't Need a Shadow: A Guide to Writing Poetry from Nature</i> . Salt Lake City: Gibbs Smith, 1994.	Krakauer, Jon. <i>Into Thin Air</i> . New York: Random House, 1997.	Fleischman, Paul. <i>Seedfolks</i> . New York: HarperCollins, 1997.
Jennings, Kate F. <i>Ansel Adams</i> . New York: Barnes and Noble, 1997.	Hines, Anna G. <i>Pieces</i> . New York: HarperCollins, 1998.	Leggett, Jeremy. <i>Global Warming and the End of the Oil Era</i> . New York: Taylor & Francis Group, 2001.	Hesse, Karen. <i>Out of the Dust</i> . New York: Scholastic, 1998.
Leopold, Aldo. <i>A Sand County Almanac</i> . New York: Oxford, 2001.	Kilcher, Jewel. <i>A Night Without Armor</i> . New York: HarperCollins, 1999.	Lopez, Barry. <i>Arctic Dreams: Imagination and Desire in a Northern Landscape</i> . New York: Vintage, 2001.	Hickam, Homer. <i>October Sky</i> . New York: Random House, 1999.
Line, Les, ed. <i>The National Audubon Society, A Century of Conservation: Speaking for Nature</i> . Southport: Hugh Lauter Levin Associates, 1999.	Quetchenbach, Bernard. <i>Back from the Far Field: American Nature Poetry in the Late Twentieth Century</i> . Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 2000.	Muir, John. <i>Nature Writings: The Story of My Boyhood and Youth, My First Summer in the Sierra, The Mountains of California, Stickeen, Essays</i> . Ed. William Cronan. New York: Library of America, 1997.	Hobbs, Will. <i>River Thunder</i> . New York: Random House, 1999.
Wolfe, Art. <i>Africa</i> . Seattle: Wildlands Press, 2001.	Spence, Gerry L. <i>Gerry Spence's Wyoming: The Landscape</i> . New York: St. Martin's Press, 2000.		O'Dell, Scott. <i>Island of the Blue Dolphins</i> . New York: Random House, 1987.
	Whitman, Walt. <i>Leaves of Grass</i> . New York: Bantam, 1998.		Rawls, Wilson. <i>Where the Red Fern Grows</i> . New York: Dell, 1996.
	Williams, Jill. <i>Nature Sonnets</i> . Arlington: Gival Press, LLC, 2001.		Rylant, Cynthia. <i>The Wonderful Happens</i> . New York: Simon & Schuster, 2000.
			Seuss, Dr., Jack Prelutsky & Lane Smith. <i>Hooray for Diffendoofer Day!</i> New York: Knopf, 1998.
			Taylor, Mildred. <i>The Land</i> . New York: Dial Books, 2001.
			Voigt, Cynthia. <i>A Solitary Blue</i> . New York: Macmillan, 1993.

of their reading. Many students found the books I'd suggested at the school or public library, and some even went to the bookstore to purchase their own copies. While my students were reading in class, I made the promise to read along with them. This was difficult for me at first, as I was conditioned to feeling guilty for taking the time to read when I felt like I should be teaching. Students loved having the opportunity to read selections they'd found on their own, and during the free reading unit I was even exposed to a great book, Paul Fleischman's *Seedfolks*, after a student suggested it to me. This book is a collection of vignettes that depict a diverse group of neighbors living in inner city Cleveland, who come together with the formation of a community garden. It provides terrific connections to Transcendentalism, and it can be read in about an hour. The book became a class favorite, and it has stayed in my repertoire of supplemental readings. When reading the journal responses, it was refreshing to note that students responded in ways that indicated they had made further connections with the curriculum while engaging in other readings. Also, my classes as a whole reacted with great energy when given an assignment that had an element of freedom. By the end of their reading, students wrote in their journals that they enjoyed the assignment and felt that they had a much stronger appreciation of the application of the themes of Transcendental literature.

Making Meaning through Multiple Intelligences

As a culmination of the Transcendental unit, I introduced Howard Gardner's theory of multiple intelligences, based on my reading of *Frames of Mind* and *Multiple Intelligences: The Theory in Practice* during graduate school. My students and I discussed Gardner's belief that knowledge is what a person uses "to resolve genuine problems or difficulties that he or she encounters and, when appropriate, to create an effective product," along with the fact that traditional knowledge is often measured in very limited ways (*Frames* 61). To further introduce the theory, each of my students participated in a variety of MI activities, including taking a few intelligence inventories. A clear and easy to use inventory appears on J. Ivanco's Web site at <http://snow.utoronto.ca/courses/mitest.html>. Another inventory developed by Walter McKenzie (<http://surfaquarium.com/Miinvent.htm>) was also very helpful to my students. In addition, we used Thomas Armstrong's "intelligent hunt"; each person

in class was given a slip of paper with an intelligence scenario and asked to find individuals in the room who demonstrated that intelligence (35). After discussing the eight intelligences theorized by Gardner and recently discussed in terms of classroom implications by Thomas Armstrong (see Table 3), students reviewed their inventories and were excited to realize their intellectual strengths. Once students discovered their strongest areas of intelligence, we discussed a form of assessment that would be used to determine the knowledge they had gained during the Transcendental unit. I provided a general list of project ideas to show students what could be considered acceptable (see Table 4), and students were then allowed to choose or modify one of the projects on the list. In order to evaluate each project, students and I collaborated in creating individual rubrics.

The rubrics were based upon understanding and analysis of the curriculum and supplementary readings completed in the unit; the thoroughness and originality of projects; and self, peer, and teacher evaluations. After the projects were submitted, we spent three days in a museum style exhibition.

There were performances from some students, and there were a variety of exhibitions containing art, photography, nature studies, and stories. Students did quality work by tapping into their intelligence and provided interesting insights through the content and presentation of their work. One particular student, who was typically somewhat quiet in class, chose to demonstrate her knowledge through a comic book that she created based on her readings. (See Figure 2.) Her artistic talent and intellect were revealed to the class, which may not have happened

TABLE 3.
EIGHT WAYS OF LEARNING (ARMSTRONG 22).

Type of Intelligence	How someone with this type thinks:
Linguistic	in words
Logical-Mathematical	by reasoning
Spatial	in images and pictures
Bodily-Kinesthetic	through somatic sensations
Musical	via rhythms and melodies
Interpersonal	by bouncing ideas off other people
Intrapersonal	in relation to their needs, feelings, goals
Naturalist	through nature and natural forms

TABLE 4.
PROJECT SUGGESTIONS FOR TRANSCENDENTAL UNIT ASSESSMENT

Linguistic	Write a portfolio of short stories or poetry that contain Transcendental ideas and themes; develop and deliver a speech.
Logical-Mathematical	Design a series of Transcendental puzzles; perform a series of nature experiments in which you document the results; design a Web page.
Spatial	Create a photo/art exhibit; make a video/documentary; make a scrapbook.
Bodily-Kinesthetic	Stage a performance (dance, act).
Musical	Create songs; perform for the class; compile a "Name that Transcendental Tune" list of thirty songs that were not discussed during class.
Interpersonal	Do an environmental survey of at least 100 of your peers, documenting the results.
Intrapersonal	Spend an hour outdoors for at least a week and design a nature journal based on the ideas gained from your classroom readings.
Naturalist	Create a nature guide for the local park, using passages from the readings for inspiration; create a garden.

FIGURE 2.
SAMPLE IRONIC COMICS FROM A UNIT PROJECT DEMONSTRATING HOW CONTEMPORARY SOCIETY OFTEN VIEWS THOREAU'S IDEAS.



through other traditional classroom activities and evaluations. Similar situations occurred as the class admired each other's projects, generating a new sense of camaraderie and excitement.

Evaluating the Results

Upon completion of the projects, students and I discussed their evaluations. One surprising finding was that students were often harder on themselves when determining the overall quality of their work. For example, one student completed a photographic essay, in which she took nature shots that interpreted scenes from *Walden*. While the photos were all connected in an outstanding fashion to the literature she had studied, she was quick to note that the quality of prints did not match her own standards of "excellence." She also stated that she had procrastinated and found herself frustrated when she ran out of the time to complete the project according to her standards. She told me that she felt the project deserved a *B*, offering her complete candor regarding her performance. This was especially interesting, as this particular young woman would often complain about her test grades if she received anything less than an *A*, most often placing blame on "a bad test" or "boring material."

In addition to this finding, it was also interesting to note that many students who had regularly struggled with the rigors of the literature in the course responded with much greater effort during this unit than they had in the past. In fact, there was a 99 percent homework completion rate for the class during this unit, which was an improvement of 15 percent from previous averages. Furthermore, when the projects were evaluated, overall student performance rose an average of 5 percent per student—the equivalent of a letter grade for many individuals. Perhaps the greatest revelation regarding achievement was my own, however, as I realized that the lecturing, skill-drill-and-kill style of teaching had not weaseled its way into my lessons as I covered the curriculum. Students did not fall asleep in class, nor did they complain while they were doing their assignments. The supplemental materials made a significant difference in interest and performance, and the project assessment motivated my students beyond comparison.

As a final element of the unit, I offered students the opportunity to take a written exam on what they'd learned through their work. I gave

them the opportunity because I truly wanted to measure the results of the projects against the results of a pencil and paper test. As an incentive for my research, I offered the test as a "free zone" option—meaning that it would not count toward their overall average. With a little persuasion, every student was convinced to take the exam, and the results again were interesting.

Once students discovered their strongest areas of intelligence, we discussed a form of assessment that would be used to determine the knowledge they had gained during the Transcendental unit.

Though the students who typically had the best averages in the class saw only an average of a 2 percent increase in scores, the marginal students who had experienced the greatest levels of disinterest and difficulty in previous units experienced substantial improvement. One student, who had practically given up during a previous unit, anxiously awaited each new component of the assignment. His average improved by 12 percent, while several students who had previously earned *C* averages saw their grades improve by an entire letter. Most importantly, students took ownership of their assessment and showed the desire to further their learning. In her book *Rainbows of Intelligence*, Sue Teele comments on the American classroom:

Many current classrooms are directed only to the linguistic and logical-mathematical students, which leaves students who process information with the other intelligences to struggle . . . Through understanding multiple intelligences and identifying dominant intelligences, educators can develop increasingly effective teaching strategies to match learning with instruction. They can also develop multiple assessment measures that match those intelligences and teaching

methods that accurately reflect what knowledge students have acquired. (85)

In his more recent publication, *Intelligence Reframed: Multiple Intelligences for the 21st Century*, Howard Gardner celebrates the acknowledgement of several intelligences stating, “. . . the monopoly of those who believe in a single general intelligence has come to an end” (203). As we English educators spend our days in the classroom, we want all of our students to come to love language as much as we do, even if they don’t have a natural aptitude for the subject. We also want all of our students to be able to understand the material covered in class, as well as to see its relevance in the real world. Through including a wide range of genres, activities, and assessments that incorporate the principles of the theory of multiple intelligences, I have found that this is possible. In the future, I hope to begin my American literature course by introducing students to all of the intelligences they bring to my classroom before we even open a book. Though I chose to modify the tenets of Gardner’s theory and incorporate a rubric during project evaluations, I have found that this provides a workable medium between the standardized testing that is being used to determine levels of accountability and the creation of products that allowed my students to have an increased sense of self-worth, while authentically demonstrating their mastery of a subject. In addition, during this unit I was often able to observe individual learning in action, something that I considered merely an unobtainable luxury in past units. In the end, students in my classroom transcended the boundaries of learning, truly reaching heights that even the likes of

Emerson and Thoreau most likely would have applauded. How wonderful for English teachers to have the tools to open the doors of life and learning, and to help their students to have a few more of the answers to life’s equations.

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EJ 60 YEARS AGO

Truth and Creativity

“The pupil who is most likely to succeed in writing creatively is the one who searches through his own life for material. He has not been told to study and emulate the great masters; on the contrary, he has been encouraged to believe that he himself has something to say if he will but find it.”

Robert W. Rounds. “Creative Writing and Living Language.” *EJ* 31.6 (1942): 454–62.
