Using Short Stories in Higher Education Courses

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Abstract

This article presents a new context for using short story creative writing assignments and conveys the student perceptions of their benefits. First, the paper addresses the importance of creativity development for today’s students followed by a discussion of ways and reasons fiction can be used outside of its traditional contexts. Next, the creative writing assignment is introduced followed by a presentation of evaluation results from two sections of graduate students who completed the assignment.

Introduction

In classes across campuses of institutions of higher education, one of the primary foci is the expansion of students’ potential to become tomorrow’s leaders and generators of new ideas and solutions. Yet all too often, educators are criticized for not providing adequate opportunities for students to develop and demonstrate higher-level thinking skills and creativity. Students pursuing degrees in educational leadership, administration, and student affairs may find themselves in particularly challenging positions as they are being trained to become administrative leaders and policy makers within institutions of higher education. They are faced with future careers that require the simultaneous and continuous use of critical thinking, problem solving, effective communication skills, and creativity.

The creation of assessment formats that allow to both craft and display all of these skills is often difficult. While assessment formats that incorporate critical thinking, problem solving, and effective communication are frequently pursued, the integration of creativity has remained elusive. As Sternberg and O’Hare (1999) point out, the relationship between creativity and intelligence is important, but psychologists and educators frequently treat creativity and intelligence as independent constructs (Kaufman, Plucker, & Baer, 2008). The purpose of this paper is to present a short story creative writing assignment that promotes creativity, self-reflection, and critical thinking while allowing students to demonstrate what they have learned all within the context of the study of higher education. The paper first discusses the importance of creativity development for today’s students followed by a discussion of ways and reasons fiction can be used outside of its traditional contexts. Next, the creative writing assignment is introduced followed by a presentation of evaluation results from two sections of graduate students who completed the assignment. The paper concludes with a discussion of how the assignment could be adapted to foster similar results in other academic programs and courses.

Creativity

The need for creativity in global leaders, societies, economies, education systems, and militaries is well-documented despite the general lack of consensus about how best to develop and foster creativity (Cropley & Cropley, 2005; Cropley & Cropley, 2009; Cropley, Kaufman, & Cropley, 2008). Among the underlying explanations for these discrepancies is the variation in definitions of creativity. Richards (2007) deemphasizes creativity as exclusively linked to school-based activities and stresses everyday creativity, suggesting that creativity is a “way of approaching life which can expand our experiences and options, and even deeply affect who we are—and can become” (p. 4). Cropley and Cropley (2009) support the notion that creativity involves the
They assert that creativity must have purpose. The researchers have been guided by this definition in this paper, namely that students were asked to create something for the purpose of expressing their understanding of some aspect of higher education through the creative process.

**Description of the Course and Short Story Assignment**

There are a wealth of novels that deal with higher education, taking place on college and university campuses and focusing on the lives of professors and students (Kramer, 2004). In the summer of 2008 a special topics course on “Campus Fiction” was offered and the following summer a course on “Higher Education in Fiction and Film” was offered. These courses offered students the opportunity to examine and critique how higher education is portrayed in fiction and film by reading short stories and novels (e.g., Straight Man by Richard Russo and I’ll Take You There by Joyce Carol Oates) and viewing films (e.g., “Higher Learning” and “Accepted”), as well an opportunity to read the academic literature on these topics (e.g., Anderson & Theilin, 2009; Kramer, 1981; Major, 1998; Pittman & Theilman, 1986; Reynolds, Schwartz, & Bower, 2000; Rossen, 1993; Showalter, 2005; Theilin & Townsend, 1988; and Tierney, 2004). These critics argue that fictional portrayals of professors, students, and campuses can illuminate and deepen our understanding of higher education.

Students in the two seminars were given an assignment to write a short story (of 15 to 20 pages) that would be classified as academic fiction or an analytic essay as their final project. Each story was graded based on how well it exemplified the issues that professors and/or students might face. Missing in academic fiction are portrayals of student affairs professionals, academic advisors, and graduate students. Not surprisingly, students in these courses—all of whom were graduate students and many of whom worked in student affairs and advising—wrote about the experiences of people in these roles. While few of the stories could likely be qualified as “great literature,” each has something substantive to say about higher education.

**Instrumentation**

To investigate the student’s perceptions of the learning outcomes of the short story assignment, data were collected from all students at the conclusion of the second section using a survey instrument developed by the researchers, asking students questions related to the students’ perceptions of the effects the short story assignment had on their learning. The questions related to the impact of the short story assignment were presented in an open-ended format, which allowed students to provide as much information as they felt necessary.

**Participants**

The survey was sent to all 23 students enrolled in the two sections of a higher education course that examined the portrayal of higher education in fiction. Eight of the nine students from the 2008 course and 11 of 14 students from the 2009 course participated in the survey (83% response rate). At the outset of the semester, students were given the option to either complete a short story or analytic essay. Of the 19 respondents, only three students opted for the analytic essay, which resulted in a final sample size of 16 responses. Ten of the students were seeking Master’s degrees (all in higher education except one MFA candidate), three were pursuing doctoral degrees (all in education), and the remaining three were non-degree graduate students (all holding master’s degrees) who were employed in student services offices at the university.

**Student Evaluations**

*Challenged Thinking about Higher Education*

Students were first asked to describe whether the short story assignment "challenged their thinking about higher education". Over 80% of the students indicated that their thinking had been challenged. In fact, about half of the respondents discussed how the short story assignment gave them new perspectives that they either did not frequently think about or had never considered. Consider the two responses from students below.
The short story assignment encouraged me to think about aspects of higher education in new ways and from different perspectives. By developing a character and determining what that character would represent, I thought about higher education in ways that I don’t typically think about it on a day to day basis.

As I began the short story assignment, I thought it would be a slam dunk. As I watched the cursor flashing onscreen, I began to question that assertion. Whenever someone creates something, it’s the ultimate form of understanding/knowledge. This assignment really encouraged me to ask myself “What is my understanding of higher education and what do I want to say about higher education?” Next, I asked myself “How can I most effectively communicate what I want to say about higher education?” Throughout the process, I considered the similarities and differences between what I believe to be true about higher education, what I was saying about higher education, and how my perceptions were impacted by experience, reading, and writing.

Deepened Understanding of Higher Education

Next, students provided insights regarding whether their understanding of higher education was deepened as a result of completing the short story assignment. Slightly more than 60% of the students reported that their understanding of higher education was enhanced to some degree as a result of the short story assignment. Interestingly, several students noted that they did not necessarily feel that their understanding changed but the manner in which they thought about higher education changed. For example, one student commented, “I’m not sure if my writing deepened my understanding of higher education, but it did deepen my understanding about how I think about higher education and why.” Students also reported learning how to think and why they think about higher education in certain ways. The student’s comment below illustrates this.

Writing a work like this definitely enhanced my awareness of my understanding of higher education...You realize what you know and what you don't when you're faced with the challenge of creating a fictitious work that should reflect some reality of academe. This assignment encouraged me to dig deeper, read more, and investigate more completely the issues that I wanted to address in my story.

Enhanced Learning Experience

In order to evaluate the students’ perceptions of the effectiveness of the short story assignment as an assessment tool, the instructors asked if the assignment “enhanced the learning experience in a way that would have been difficult to duplicate in a different assessment (e.g., multiple-choice test)”. Nearly every student (94%) who completed the survey expressed positive remarks with this question, which suggests overwhelming support in favor of the short story assignment. However, it should be noted that only multiple-choice test was provided as an example in the prompt, which could have influenced responses.

Not only did students comment on the comprehensive nature of the short story assignment as an assessment tool, but they also discussed the challenge of communicating effectively and becoming more aware of their own perspectives. One student commented that,

I considered certain biases or perceptions and then questioned why/what experiences lead[sic] me to believe these things about higher education, and there is not a great deal of space for that in my program. This was an assignment that helped me grow and know more about myself in addition to thinking about higher education. This could NOT have been done candidly in any other form of assessment.

External Benefits of Writing Short Story

Students also provided their feedback on any benefits they experienced that were not directly related to the course. Interestingly, every student who completed the course evaluation described in detail at least one external benefit they had personally experienced as a result of the short story assignment. Half of the students shared that the experience had challenged and stimulated their...
creative writing skills. About 20% of the students explained the assignment provided an opportunity for catharsis and/or provided a fresh new approach to demonstrating and applying what they had learned. Consider the benefits in the students’ own words:

Most definitely! As mentioned before, the short story allowed me to step outside of my comfort zone and write in a way that I normally do not. I have greater confidence now in my writing abilities, particularly as they relate to being more creative in my writing. This was by far [the] best assignment I have ever received in a graduate school class. I am proud of my short story and that I was able to think and write in this way.

It stimulated creativity - although was much more difficult to write than I would have expected!...[it] caused me to think more about my non-academic writing style and how I could improve on that.

The assignment helped me to get a lot of anxiety about work out on paper. Maybe my assignment was based on some truth which helped me get through that summer at work, and I think that is how many authors get started. I think that is also why I enjoyed the class so much. Because the creative story written by each student could go wherever the student chose to take it, the stories were all unique and interesting.

Recommendation for Other Professors

Finally, students were asked whether they would recommend the assignment to other instructors. Of the 15 respondents to this particular question, 12 (80%) indicated that they would recommend the short story assignment to other instructors. Several students also acknowledged that their recommendations were dependent upon the content of the course. The student responses below are reflective of thoughts shared by many of the respondents.

Where feasible, yes. I would caution professors against force fitting this assignment, but when used in the right context, the assignment provides a very powerful learning experience.

Yes, it allows students to work with an issue in a more personal way, and gain a greater understanding of it by putting themselves or a character they’ve created into it.

Summary of findings

The preceding section presents the analysis of the students’ responses regarding the effectiveness of the short story assignment. Among the reported benefits were enhanced awareness of one’s own approach to thinking about topics related to higher education and of how one goes about their job in university services or administration. Students also mentioned more frequent self-reflection, careful consideration of effective communication strategies, and even external benefits, such as experiencing catharsis and stimulating creativity. Overall, the students’ accounts of their experiences with creating a short story were positive, and students would recommend the short story assignment to professors of other courses depending on the academic content.

Conclusions

The purpose of this article has been to present a new context for using a short story creative writing assignment and convey the student perceptions of its benefits. While the authors acknowledge that the use of short stories may not be feasible in all courses, this paper outlines how short stories were used within the context of a course on higher education to enhance learning and give students the opportunity to explore their own creativity. It should be noted that in certain cases, students may, initially, be uneasy about writing a short story, because many students in higher education programs are more accustomed to writing critical essays and research papers. For example, most of the students had never written a short story or had not done so since high school. Thus, creative writing may be a task that is relatively unfamiliar. Anxiety over or lack of familiarity with the assignment format should not stifle the creative process. Care should be taken to ensure students that the true purpose of the short story assignment is to contextually demonstrate what they have learned about higher education. Using the short story
the assignment provided an opportunity to demonstrate and apply skills learned: it showed me to step outside of my comfort zone and become more creative in my writing compared to what I am used to in graduate school class. I have greater confidence now in my ability to write in this way.

This kind of assignment would recommend fitting this assignment, because it is such a very powerful learning experience. Students would recommend the short story assignment to other instructors. They’ve created into it, and the students’ accounts regarding the effectiveness of using a short story creative writing assignment later in the semester may also mitigate potential feelings of uneasiness. The students did report finding the assignment more challenging than they expected as they struggled to articulate a point of view through fiction, yet, as is evidenced from the survey findings, they embraced the opportunity to write a short story. Many also commented that creating something from the ground-up instead of analyzing or synthesizing the works of others was enlightening. Most importantly, the students conveyed that writing a short story engaged them and stimulated their critical thinking, self-reflection, and consideration of content knowledge at a much deeper level – the optimal learning outcomes of any course.

References
