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WHY SIZE MATTERS: FLASH FICTION IN HIGH SCHOOL ENGLISH

by

Wayne R. Ashby

An action research inquiry submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirement for the
degree of

Master of Arts in English


Longwood University

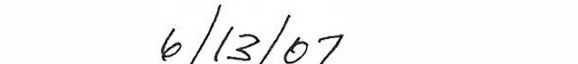
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Abstract

This action research project explores the value of flash fiction in the secondary classroom. Flash fiction draws heavily on oral traditions such as the joke, and the fable, to present complete stories in fewer than 1500 words. The form has flourished in recent years, particularly on the internet, where literary journals such as *The Vestal Review*, *SmokeLong Quarterly*, and *Toasted Cheese*, publish engaging, and provocative stories. By examining how students react to the unique characteristics of flash fiction, teachers can make the most this valuable and abundant resource.

This article describes how students at a public secondary charter school responded to a unit on flash fiction. Data from writing assignments and online discussions during the unit show that the unit on flash fiction helped students become more engaged readers and more confident writers. An analysis of the flash fiction that students chose to study suggests that flash fiction may enable teachers to differentiate lessons more precisely based on gender, interest, and ability. Specifically, flash fiction may be particularly appealing to male students who do not consider reading a masculine activity. Methods for teaching flash fiction in conjunction with online threaded discussion forums are also discussed as a method of integrating the study of literature with new literacy skills required in online environment.



Introduction

Robert Probst articulates a question that has troubled me since I began my preparation to teach English. He writes of his typical students:

If they aren't scholars, if they don't have the instinctive love of books that probably led us into teaching English in the first place, how then do we approach them? How do we justify the time and energy we ask them to expend upon imaginative inventions, the hours we expect them to spend reading and writing, hours they might prefer to spend watching television or roaming the streets?

(Response 37).

Probst's answer is for teachers to make the study of literature an inherently interesting experience for students. Although most teachers support this solution in theory, trends in student and adult literacy suggest that too many teachers have not managed to realize this ideal. Many college freshmen are not prepared for college level reading and writing, and adult literacy is declining. Research conducted through the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) Postsecondary Education Quick Information System (PEQIS) shows that 11% of all college freshman require courses in remedial reading, while 14% require courses in remedial writing. Freshman attending two year colleges require remediation more often, with 20% needing remediation in reading and 23% needing remediation in writing (PEQIS). Similarly, research reveals that "The percentage of adults age twenty-five or older who reported reading any literature in the past 12 months declined between 1982 and 2002, from 56 to 47 percent, with most of the decrease occurring between 1992 and 2002" (NCES). More specifically, the average prose literacy of adults, defined as, "the knowledge and skills needed to perform prose

tasks (i.e., to search, comprehend, and use information from continuous texts, such as paragraphs from stories),” declined between 1992 and 2003 (NCES).

Perhaps more alarming is the increasing disparity between strong and weak students. The scores of low achieving twelfth-graders, those at the 10th and 25th percentile, decreased. Meanwhile, the scores of high performing students, those at the 90th percentile, increased (NCES). This continuing disparity suggests that the students needing the most help improving their literacy are not getting what they need.

Results like these make the information reported in the ACT National Curriculum Survey even more surprising. According to the survey, many high schools do not systematically teach reading after tenth grade (ACT 31). Instead, students typically spend their eleventh and twelfth grade years learning the jargon of literary critics and historical facts related to literature rather than the cognitive skills that will improve their literacy. Bushman and Hass conclude that, “[Schools] have accomplished just the opposite of what they intended to do: They have turned students off from reading rather than made them lifelong readers... Teachers have failed to choose literature that enables students to become emotionally and cognitively involved in what they read” (Bushman and Haas 3). This study explores the potential of flash fiction to stimulate just that kind of involvement in high school students.

An Approach that Works

Probst explains that, “Literature provides us not knowledge ready-made but the opportunity to make knowledge. And it is knowledge not about things-those it leaves to scientists and engineers- but about relationships and values and purposes” (Adolescent Literature 3). While I agree that Probst’s perspective provides a sufficient reason to

teach literature, I would like to emphasize that studying literature also helps students learn across the curriculum. For example, Gregory Colomb notes that, “It appears that underlying every text, even densely analytical texts, is a story with actions, characters, settings, and so on, and that one component of understanding involves matching the text to its story” (424). In other words, in order to understand new information, we must relate it to a story or combination of stories we already know. Judith Langer calls our ability to create these mental story worlds “envisionment” (*Envisioning Literature* 9).

Langer and Probst have built on the work of Louise Rosenblatt to develop a reader response approach to literature. This approach encourages students to connect with a texts in personally relevant ways. Langer’s analysis shows that such an approach leads to positive outcomes in terms of student learning:

Unusually successful and more typical teachers' approaches to student learning were decidedly different. . . all of the more successful teachers took a generative approach to student learning, going beyond students' acquisition of the skills or knowledge to engage them in deeper understandings. In comparison, all of the more typical teachers tended to move on to other goals and activities once they had evidence that the target skills or knowledge had been learned (Odds 870).

Because students learn more by responding to literature than they do from listening to explanations from teachers, providing students with literature that provokes a strong response is one of the teacher’s most important responsibilities.

Bushman and Haas present a convincing argument that young adult literature is particularly well suited to such an approach. They explain how the specific social and cognitive needs of adolescents are better served by young adult literature than the traditional literary cannon. Bushman and Haas describe how both the content and the style of young adult literature make it accessible to adolescents. Adolescents respond best to literature that is developmentally appropriate in terms of theme, content, style, and difficulty. While much attention has been paid to the theme and content of young adult literature, the style of writing also plays a major role in how adolescents respond to it. Bushman and Haas note:

Many young adults are likely to appreciate a more direct plot than those often found in traditional classics, which include a great deal of description before and within the story line—a story line that often covers a long period. Young adult literature, instead, usually begins effectively and directly with a hook, dialogue, or action and covers a shorter period. . . the characteristic of most young adult literature is to provide a thought provoking ending—one that frequently leaves some loose ends for the reader to ponder, question, and extend. . . Open ended pieces are conducive to creating activities that will extend the students' thinking and interpretation" (50).

Characteristics such as these, characteristics that increase our students' interest, are worth closer consideration. Research on student motivation finds that, "in terms of cognitive outcomes, interest is generally related positively to measures of memory, attention, comprehension, deeper cognitive engagement, and thinking" (Pintrich 306). In effect, interesting material helps students practice more complex thinking skills. These thinking skills then provide students with a framework, or schema, for accessing more

demanding texts. This means we can use high-interest literature to bootstrap our student's literacy.

Why Style Matters

Another important factor in our students' performance is their sense of self-efficacy. Researchers have found that, "The type of information processing required affects self-efficacy and motivation. Students who have difficulty processing information required by a task may conclude they have low ability and feel less certain about learning than those who believe they can process the material. . . For print materials, higher self-efficacy is associated with greater expended effort" (Pintrich 179). When students feel that the literature they are reading is "easy," they may be willing to offer more meaningful responses to it.

Perceived self-determination is also a significant factor in student performance. Experimental research (Pintrich 272) and reports from expert practitioners such as Nancie Atwell, Nancy Steineke, and Harvey Daniels indicate the inherent value of students' belief that they have a choice in what they study. This not only increases their motivation to read but also allows them to practice independence from adult authority--an important developmental task for adolescents (Bushman and Haas 8-13).

Introducing Flash Fiction

My review of this information suggests the most effective reading curriculum would include literature that is student selected and stimulating. While some works from the traditional canon and most young adult literature can provide these elements, I would

like to introduce flash fiction as another valuable form of literature for the high school classroom.

The term flash fiction refers to extremely short short stories. While the exact word count is arbitrary, the typical length is between 500-1000 words (Casto). For the purposes of this paper, I will include stories under 1500 words as flash fiction. Although I introduced flash fiction to my students as stories with fewer than 1000 words, many students were drawn to stories that were somewhat over that limit. However, when stories exceeded 1500 words, students tended to comment that they were too long.

Like young adult fiction, flash fiction typically employs strong initial hooks, direct plots, and endings with a twist. Also like young adult fiction, flash fiction tends to question centralized authority, making it relevant to teens struggling to define themselves as individuals and members of community. Shapard and Thomas describe these very short stories as a subgenre that is, "tantalizing, protean, and highly charged," —a description that could easily apply to the adolescent mentality. How many teachers hear the voice of that intelligent but underachieving student in the back row when Charles Baxter writes, "Explainers don't seem to be explaining very much anymore. Authoritative accounts have a way of looking like official lies, which in their solemnity start to sound funny" (22). Essentially, Baxter argues that very short stories do not have room for pretense. Instead, the form encourages an aesthetic that values humor, skepticism and surrealism.

Baxter suggests that long novels often seem oppressive, giving him, "the nagging thought that the length of their works is arbitrary, or worse, artificial"(Baxter 17). He argues that massive tomes like *Moby Dick* reflect the western idea of imperialism--that bigger is better. In contrast, flash fiction provides a more democratic perspective, "It is

as if a shift has occurred in these stories away from the imperial character of the nineteenth century novel toward ritual, spontaneity, humor, and forgiveness” (Baxter 21). If this is true, and the literature that we read truly does influence our culture, then flash fiction should play a prominent role in student-centered classrooms.

Exploring the lower limits of length, Jerome Stern collected works of fiction that were no more than 250 words long. Stern calls these stories Micro-fiction and asserts that they are not the gimmickry of post-modern literati, but rather a legitimate form related to the fable, joke, anecdote, and parable (16-18). Stern asserts that such compact stories are rooted in an oral tradition. Sociocognitive pedagogy suggests that oral language is a vital foundation for written language (Langer and Appleby 171-194). If this is the case, then contemporary flash fiction can provide an effective link between the two modalities.

By focusing on stories with fewer than 750 words, Thomas and Shapard highlight the immediacy of flash fiction (Flash Fiction 12). Quoting author Grace Paley, they explain that the condensed form of flash means that readers cannot afford to skim anything (Flash 13). Novels require students to compress specific details into abstract representations so that their working memories are not overloaded, a process that cognitive scientists refer to as chunking. In contrast, flash fiction, much like poetry, requires constant vigilance of its reader. It demands attention to detail and language while allowing students to hold the entire story in their minds.

Recently, flash fiction has been flourishing in print and on the internet. However, very little has been written about how to teach it. Perhaps this void is because flash fiction is relatively new to academia. Perhaps it is because scholars have not identified flash fiction as a distinct form of fiction. Perhaps it is because flash fiction is simply too

short to be taken seriously. Regardless of why it has been ignored, flash fiction deserves our attention both as a literary form and as a tool for teaching.

Why Size Matters

The brevity of flash fiction may evoke responses from students that are qualitatively different from the responses triggered by longer works of fiction. Although I am not aware of any specific experimental research on the issue, the Sociocognitive model of literacy provides useful insight about these differences. Langer and Appleby use the term Sociocognitive to denote the systemic interplay of social interaction and individual thinking processes. From a social perspective, flash fiction is short enough to share as part of a social interaction, while longer works take longer to read, requiring longer periods without social interaction. Furthermore, its tendency to be shocking, strange, ambiguous, or funny, often triggers authentic discussion among students. Obviously flash fiction does not hold a monopoly on these characteristics, but it does emphasize them consistently.

From a cognitive perspective, flash fiction offers accessible stories. Composition theorist, Peter Elbow demonstrates the reader's challenge when processing a large text with the following thought experiment:

Imagine an ant trying to look at [a] painting by crawling around on it. He can't see this picture very well. He can't get away from it, can't get any perspective—particularly to appreciate its organization... The ants' problem is a problem of space: he's too close. If he could fly he could get a "bird's-eye-view" or "snapshot." But this space problem is also—and more deeply—a time problem. The ant can take in only a little bit at once. Even though time may be a factor in

our experience of pictures as we move our visual focus around, yet as we do so, we still have a real if sometimes peripheral vision of the whole picture. For us, the whole is always somewhat in view. But not for our poor little ant. When we read a text, we are like the ant. The text is laid out in space across multiple pages, but we can only read one small part at a time.” (621)

From a cognitive perspective, flash fiction gives our students the “snapshot” they need. Or as Baxter puts it, “It is as if the Titanic ego of fiction has been brought down to a human scale” (Baxter 22-23). Students are able to envision a complete work clearly enough to discuss it with confidence. Colomb says, “To see a text as coherent, we must be able to interact with it as a single, focal point of attention” (277). When a text extends beyond our ability to focus on it as a single unit, readers must chunk it into manageable units. For unskilled readers, that can be an overwhelming task.

While decoding the words on the page may be relatively simple, the cognitive processes required to understand even the shortest stories are complex. Students cannot develop these thinking skills if they are overwhelmed by the need to decode and remember all the details of a long text. This explains why Daniels and Zemelman suggest that we use, “subject related short selections when you teach kids the specific reading strategies” (Subjects 60). Similarly, Langer distinguishes between “local envisionment” and “final envisionment”:

During the reading of any particular book or play or chapter, a reader has a “local” envisionment, which changes as new thoughts (from the work, from the reader, and from other people and events) lead to changes in overall understanding. In this way, a local envisionment evolves into a “final” envisionment that is not the sum total of what we thought along the way but is a

modified envisionment resulting from all the transmutations of local envisionments that have led to this one. (14-15)

That means students cannot genuinely analyze or evaluate a story until they have finished the entire text.

Teaching with Flash Fiction

In order to explore how students would respond to flash fiction, I presented a three week unit on the form at Murray High School. Murray High School is an alternative school for students who are not able to succeed in traditional schools. My classes were typically small with 8-20 students. These classes consisted of ninth through twelfth graders many of whom had learning disabilities. All students had access to laptop computers with wireless internet connections. Murray operates a four by four block schedule with classes meeting for 85 minute blocks five days per week. A semester-long course is worth a year's credit in a traditional high school.

The Context

As a Glasser Quality school, student choice is a central theme at Murray. Instead of coercing students to be obedient, teachers help students make positive choices. While this philosophy is most evident in the way that disruptive behaviors are addressed, it also apparent in the pedagogical decisions that the teachers make. Students who are uninspired by a particular project are encouraged to request or suggest reasonable alternatives. For example, when one student found oral reading and class discussion too tedious, he was allowed to read independently in the hall while keeping a journal of his thoughts about the book. This system has proven effective. While 36% of students at

Murray have special education needs, 91% of all students pass the 2006 Virginia Standards of Learning for Reading and 100% passed the 2007 writing SOL administered during this unit.

In keeping with the school's emphasis on student choice, I presented a sequence of four assignments that allowed students to choose the stories that they would study. The following sequence of reader response activities emphasized student choice, authentic sharing, collaboration, and creative interpretation of flash fiction. Also during this unit, my students wrote original works of flash fiction. A closer look at how students responded to these assignments reveals the value of flash fiction in the high school classroom. I will present a brief overview of the lessons I used, followed by a description of specific observations and a discussion of some trends I noticed.

The Sequence of Reading Responses

Finding Flash Fiction

My goal for the first assignment in this sequence was to create an experience similar to that of sharing music and videos on social networking sites like Myspace. Students were to search the web for four pieces of flash fiction that they enjoyed enough to share with their classmates. I provided them with links to several online literary magazines and gave them permission to use search engines to expand their search. After finding stories they liked, students were to post a link to each story, along with the reason they choose it, to the class's threaded discussion forum. To complete the assignment, students read and responded to at least three recommendations made by their classmates.

Literature Circles

The literature circle assignment was an adaptation of Harvey Daniels literature circles. First, students were assigned to five member groups. Then, each group was to choose six stories from recommendations made during the finding flash fiction assignment. Next, students chose roles to play in the group. These roles required students to respond to the stories from multiple perspectives. One student from each group read the text aloud, another was responsible for identifying particularly strong or unusual words in the text, while others summarized the plot, described personal connections to the story, and identified the type conflict depicted. Students were allowed to choose the stories they liked but had to negotiate these choices within their groups. The goal of this assignment was to stimulate meaningful small group discussion.

Role Playing Presentations

The movie pitch presentation was a role-playing activity. My students assumed the roles of Hollywood agents pitching pieces of flash fiction to a group of movie executives. During the presentations, each student, playing the part of a Hollywood agent, gave a brief pitch and then engaged in a rehearsed question/answer session with group members who were acting as movie studio executives. Agents were not allowed to use notes or scripts. The purpose of this assignment was to help students fully envision the stories they chose.

Evaluating Stories

The final assignment in this instructional sequence asked students to articulate their personal criteria evaluating stories by creating a four by four rubric. Then, they

used that information to critically evaluate the stories they discussed in their literature circles. This assignment took advantage of flash fiction's immediacy by allowing students to read several complete stories in a relatively short amount of time. The object of this assignment was for students to improve their understanding of how they evaluate literature.

Student Responses

Most students responded favorably to this instructional sequence, finding the stories both interesting and accessible. For example, Tim (all student names are pseudonyms, all spelling and mechanics are quoted as originally written by students) described one of his favorite stories by writing, "It's got action, it's suspenseful, and it's not too simple to follow (you need to think a little, but not too much)." Putting it bluntly, Brian wrote, "it's an excellent story style for someone that doesn't read a lot."

However, this is not to say that all students liked flash fiction immediately. For some, it was an acquired taste. Dave, a fan of "Dungeons and Dragons" style fantasy, wrote,

I did not like how this story left me hanging and didn't fill me in on any background information. It just leaves me wondering. Maybe that was the author's goal so that we would think in depth about the story but I just take it as laziness on their part. I guess with flash fiction you sort of have to do that so I guess I just don't like flash fiction as a whole. Until I read a flash fiction I like then that is my opinion of them. I don't like to be kept guessing. In my opinion it is the author's job to fill us in.

Several students shared Dave's first impression. Generally these students were avid readers who missed being able to escape into the fictional world of the stories. Reading flash fiction challenged them to appreciate different aspects of literature. Fortunately, most of them were up to the challenge. As Dave wrote after completing the unit, "I learned a lot more respect for short story writers, because they have to make a good story without many details and background. In spite of that fact, many of the stories I read were pretty good, which means everything is shorter and more to the point."

Another student, Brad, was eager to discuss Science Fiction books that he read on his own, but reluctant to discuss books assigned in class. He stated that he typically did not waste his time reading books that he did not find immediately interesting. He explained, "Most of what I've known intuitively about my likes and dislikes concerning stories I never really thought about. Mostly it was 'yuck, bad story,' or 'great, good story.'"

Although he was an avid reader, Brad had such strong preferences for science fiction and fantasy novels that he dismissed other genres without giving them a chance. By analyzing a wide variety of styles presented in flash fiction, he was able to see the reasons behind his intuitive reactions. As a result, he learned to appreciate specific aspects of stories even when he did not like the story as a whole. For example, in response to a story his class mate recommended he wrote, "I think it's well written, though my bent isn't towards 'undead' and 'demonic.' It DOES however bring forth some interesting imagery." Such responses demonstrate that flash fiction can be valuable to avid readers as well as reluctant readers.

Examples of student work from the beginning and end of the unit show that flash fiction can foster reading habits typical of good readers. Bruce Piere identifies habits such as visualizing, making connections, finding patterns, filling inferential gaps, and

questioning the text (82-83). At the beginning of the unit, Frank, a reluctant reader who's perfectionism often interfered with his ability to complete written work, submitted the following reason for one of his story choices: "I think that this caught my attention , I [like] to read things that can get my attention." He did not explain his other story choices at all. In contrast, when he did the same assignment at the end of the unit, he offered the following rationale for his choices, For his first choice he wrote, "I like this story because it's honest and tell the truth about people talking about a fat girl. And looking at her in the bathroom talking about her cellulite from her butt to her ankles." For his second choice he wrote, "This story is kinda like an episode of law in order. I mean think about it dead man in the water, missing girls. They should make it into one I would watch it." And for his third choice he wrote, "This story is different, I like it because it's funny and weird. I think that there will soon be a lot of little rats. The question is who will get to keep them or will thy split them." These responses show that Frank has started to make connections between the literature and both real life and other works of fiction. His responses also show that he has started making predictions and questioning the text—all strategies used by good readers.

Jenny demonstrated similar growth in her responses to flash fiction. A capable student, she did not consider English her strong suit, writing, "Generally, English is not one of my favorite classes; actually nothing really is except for art." Her initial rationale for liking stories included the following comments: "its cute!" "I like it because it's actually interesting and not as boring ass some." And, "I like this story because it makes more sense than all the others."

After our three week unit, Jenny's comments demonstrated significantly more engagement with the text. She wrote: "I like this story because it shows that you can use

your imagination to twist anything that you have learned, been told, or believed since you were a young child.” and, “I thought this was a good story because it is rather unrealistic for a girl to be as light as a feather, and then have weights put into her, and then cut them out herself and float away, but it creates an interesting picture in your mind, and you would need to have an open mind to think about it.” Like Frank, Jenny offered more fully developed responses by the end of the unit, suggesting a change in her ability to find interesting stories, her ability to respond, or both.

Flash also improved my students’ sense of self efficacy when they made oral presentations. For example, after the movie pitch presentation, Mandy wrote, “it is the first time I have been able to present my work without having a script to read directly from. I think that my ability to read and understand what I have read was what ultimately helped me in my oral presentation.”

Flash fiction for Writing Instruction

Between each literature lesson, I devoted a full class period to creative writing. Students responded to prompts that I provided followed by small group feedback sessions. The prompts that elicited the best flash fiction provided students with a structure for ending their pieces. For example, once I required that they end their stories with a specific sentence. On another occasion, my instruction was that their characters had to assemble something.

A Model of Concision

Flash fiction provides as model of concise writing. Several students expressed relief when they were given permission to write very short stories. Brenda, an extremely conscientious student, wrote, “I’ve learned that good stories don’t have to be long. . .

Flash fiction has taught me how to leave the pointless/useless information out of my stories.” Although teachers constantly tell students that quality is more important than quantity, the implicit message sent by eight-hundred page text books is that credibility and size go hand in hand. Flash fiction provides an alternative model—a model that students feel capable of emulating. As Tina put it, “I learned that there is a way to write a detailed story with adventure and interesting characters that isn’t 100 pages long. Which means that maybe I’ll be able to do that too. Oh wait, I already did.”

Empowering Students

Flash fiction can teach students more than concise writing. It also provides a complete story structure in an accessible scale. Christian reflected on reading his first piece of flash fiction, “It was groundwork that laid my outlines for future stories.” This groundwork had a profound impact on his confidence as a writer. After finishing his own story, he wrote, “I actually felt an accomplishment when I finished it. The story itself isn’t a long novel or anything but it is sweet and gets to the point without ranting on about the person’s life that the reader wouldn’t care about. . . My story has shown some of my better work and I feel like it is something I can feel comfortable showing to someone.”

Responding to Flash Fiction with Flash Fiction

During this unit, I discovered an unexpected way to use flash fiction in support of my students’ writing. Wendy had been struggling to write one of her stories for several days and was becoming frustrated. I suggested that she tell the story from a first person perspective instead of third. She agreed to give it a try. Later that day, bubbling with

pride, she presented me with her revised story. She was thrilled with her creative breakthrough. When I read her new story, it struck me as remarkably similar to "The Chair Affair" by Jade Walker, a flash fiction story I had taught in another class. I dug a copy of "The Chair Affair" out of my file and handed it to Wendy. Intrigued, she immediately took the story back to her desk and read it. A moment later, she handed the story to one of her friends and said, "You've got to read this." Of course, her friend did. Instead of analyzing her success into oblivion, I validated her artistic expression by responding with a related work of art. Since that first experience, I have used flash fiction as a response to student writing a number of times. Each time, my students have read my offerings enthusiastically.

The Big Picture

Inductive Analysis of Student Recommendations

An inductive analysis of the recommendations that students made during the "finding flash fiction assignment," reveals several themes. Students tended to describe the stories they recommended as interesting, strange, having strong endings, humorous, or personally relevant. Keeping these responses in mind may be useful in developing lessons that use flash fiction.

The term "interesting" was used 21 times to compliment stories. The prevalence of this catch all term suggests that students may have been unable to articulate specifically what they found interesting about the story. Each time students read a new piece of flash, they must create an envisionment from scratch. Doing so is good practice, but often challenging. Many students need specific scaffolding to help them identify and articulate what they find interesting. One method to help students identify and articulate

what interests them is to suggest ways that they can categorize the stories. Research has shown that this type of categorization is one of the most worthwhile activities for students to practice, fostering a thinking skill that is valuable across the curriculum (Marzano 13). These categories also provide students with a common lexicon, which facilitates their sharing and discussion of what they read.

When students explained their choices more specifically, they recommended stories that were strange 19 times, that had strong endings 15 times, that were funny 14 times, and that had personal relevance 8 times. Perhaps asking students to sort or tag stories that they read based on these characteristics could be a way to more effectively organize student-generated lists of recommendations. Students could then refer to these lists of recommendations when selecting stories to read. Techniques for sorting and organizing flash fiction are important if students will be reading more than a few stories. Earlier, I discussed the benefits of flash fiction being small. However being small can also be a challenge. While flash fiction is small enough to hold in mind all at once it is also small enough to overlook, lose, or forget-- particularly when the stories are online rather than in print. This challenge presents an ideal opportunity to teach students how and why information should be organized effectively.

Flash fiction may also help students develop more mature attitudes toward literature. Carlsen presents stages of reading development that describe how readers value literature differently over time (Bushman and Haas 21-22). In Carlsen's model, readers progress from unconscious delight, to identification with characters, to philosophical engagement, to aesthetic appreciation, with each higher stage subsuming those below it. Several of my students seemed to use flash fiction as an opportunity to explore stories that triggered more than "unconscious delight." When they read stories

that were sad, they felt the need to qualify their recommendations. For example one student wrote, “I thought it was kind of sad, but funny at the same time,” and another student wrote, “It’s a little sad, but it’s probably pretty truthful.” Instead of saying that the stories were “sad *and* funny,” or “sad *and* truthful,” these students used the word “but” to negate the sadness with a positive quality. I sense an inner conflict in these comments, as if students are struggling with the idea that stories can be good even when they are not pleasurable. When students qualify their recommendation of sad stories, they show that they are still connected to the first stage of Carlsen’s model or that they unconsciously appreciate their classmates’ connection to that stage. However, by not rejecting the stories, they are also connecting with one of the higher stages of reading development, though which one is not always clear. In contrast, when one of my classes read Kafka’s *Metamorphosis*, prior to the unit on flash fiction, they seemed so overwhelmed with the emotion of the story that they were not interested in exploring its philosophical or aesthetic qualities; they simply wanted it to end. In contrast, the brevity of flash fiction allowed students to grapple with these new perspectives without being overwhelmed by sadness.

Types of Protagonist

Overall, students only made eight recommendations in which they explicitly identified with the characters in a story. I wondered if my students did not care about this aspect of the stories or if they did not notice that they cared. My analysis suggests that young characters, either adolescents or children may have a special appeal to students. Out of forty recommendations, fourteen were for stories with young central characters. The remaining eighteen focused on adult characters. Although the majority of stories

focused on adult characters, the relatively high percentage of stories about young characters seems significant. Online, stories about adults vastly outnumber stories about young characters. It would have been far easier to choose stories about adults. These findings suggest that flash fiction about young characters may be an especially powerful tool for engaging students.

Looking at the same forty recommendations, this time in terms of gender, female students recommended stories focusing on male characters seven times, and female characters eight times. Male students recommended stories focusing on male characters eleven times and female characters six times. Although the male students clearly favored stories about male characters, they did not categorically reject stories about female characters. This is different than their typical reaction to novels focusing on female characters. Flash fiction may be a valuable tool for expanding the horizons of male students.

Male students only recommended two stories that did not specify the gender of the central character, while female students made five such recommendations. In longer works, such ambiguity would be a glaring omission. However, in flash fiction, the intensity of the situation often transcends gender. This type of flash fiction may be particularly useful for discussions that question gender stereotypes.

Value to Male Students

Summarizing data from the National Assessment of Educational Progress, Bruce Pirie reports that about ten percent more girls than boys reach the higher levels of reading achievement as defined by scores on standardized tests, and that “there are about twice as many girls as boys at the “proficient” or “advanced” levels of writing in the high schools”

(3). Pirie offers several reasons for this disparity. Boys do not perceive reading as a masculine activity; they see it as “passive and lonely”(76). Boys are not interested in the type of reading that is valued in English classes; they prefer fantasy, action, and humor to social realism (79). Boys do not value reading; when they are allowed to choose, they often, “show up with hastily chosen reading to which they have no real commitment, or without any reading material at all” (80). And finally, boys do not share books with each other (80).

Flash fiction mitigates many of these challenges. Like longer fiction, flash fiction offers variety in terms of style and content, but it does not require a large commitment of time to reach a satisfying conclusion. Boys can explore different types of story, particularly online. Hunting for a great story, especially on the web, is an active, typically masculine endeavor. While appealing to their masculine nature, searching for flash fiction online can also give boys a chance to nurture an appreciation for the feminine perspective. Sitting at a computer, boys have the opportunity to discretely sample a wide range of stories.

Boys are more inclined to discuss a work of fiction by relating it to other works of fiction than to their personal lives. They tend to draw strong distinctions between reality and fiction, and between public and private information. Pirie explains, “to suggest that [a work of fiction] has something to do with [a boy’s] life not only crosses a conceptual boundary, it feels like an intrusion”(92). For boys who do not have a strong history of reading, this poses a dilemma. Pirie suggests using movies and television as point of connection. Like popular media, flash fiction can provide another efficient way for all members of a class to share a common pool of fictional reference points.

By being short and intense, flash fiction is easier than longer fiction for boys to share. It does not require extended periods of inactivity, but does stimulate social interaction. I have mentioned that students identify humor as an important aspect of these stories. Pirie notes that joke books are a favorite among boys when they are allowed to choose their own reading material (79). In the classes that I taught, it was not uncommon to hear a hearty chuckle from one of my male students followed by something along the lines of, "Hey, check this out." Boys can express their feelings through the flash fiction they choose to share. This allows them to express emotion in the context of task completion.

Encouraging New Literacy

As a form well suited to the internet, flash fiction provides a natural opportunity to help students develop "new literacy" skills, and to leverage the benefits of virtual learning environments. The term "new literacy" refers to the skills necessary to find, comprehend, evaluate and communicate information online. Coiro convincingly argues that these skills are qualitatively different from traditional literacy skills and should be taught explicitly (12-14). Preliminary evidence suggests that when students develop these new literacy skills, they are also more successful in meeting traditional learning objectives. For example, Ann Koory writes:

The online version of "Introduction to Shakespeare" course has consistently better learning outcomes than the on-campus version, as a result of the compelling nature of the one-to-one communication mode online and the textual nature of the many-to-many and one-to-many modes online. Text-based communication in the online class reinforces the skills pertinent to a literature class (Koory).

And, after analyzing her students' reactions to online classes, Sangmin Lee explains that, "the discussion board helped the students not only learn about themselves and from others, but also helped them articulate their ideas and thoughts with others more easily" (Lee).

These benefits are consistent with sociocognitive theory in that self selected, socially validated activities promote learning. The act of finding and sharing art online is an authentic, and socially relevant activity for high school students. 84% of high school students report visiting websites about movies, TV shows, music groups, or sports stars. When surveyed about their use of instant messaging, 50% of students who used instant messaging reported sharing links to interesting or funny articles, and 31% sent music or video files(Lenhart vi). In my own experience, students routinely used the computers in my room before school for this purpose, enthusiastically sharing and discussing online media. Much of my motivation for this study was inspired by my curiosity about how to direct such enthusiasm toward literature.

Although online learning environments are potentially valuable, they are not inherently beneficial. Like any tool, they must be used with skill. My initial attempt at using threaded discussion forums on Blackboard was only moderately successful. Students were able to efficiently share the flash fiction that they found. However, they rarely engaged in the ongoing discussion that makes threaded discussions truly powerful. Further research on methods of facilitating threaded discussion forums, should compound the benefits of studying flash fiction online.

Conclusion

This project provides a rationale for teaching flash fiction in the high school classroom. While I feel that flash fiction is distinct from longer forms of fiction, and that flash fiction has many useful characteristics, I am by no means asserting that it is superior to the other forms. Future research must include a discussion of how it can be integrated with these other forms in a comprehensive curriculum. I am aware that this article seems to raise more questions than it answers. My hope is that it will serve as a catalyst for future research on the benefits of flash fiction, and discussion of how it can be utilized in the classroom.

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