

Disciplinary Boundaries and Creative Pedagogical Practices

Teaching in higher education is normally organized within disciplinary boundaries that situate particular kinds of learning experiences within specific courses or subject areas. Amidst debates around the merits of creating interdisciplinary programs (Schlegel, 2011; Stewart, 2010), there has been limited consideration given to how creative pedagogical practices might strive to transgress disciplinary boundaries within higher education. Yet if universities are to challenge students to think critically, innovative and creative approaches to teaching need to be considered.

Drawing upon research from a Social Science and Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRC) funded study that examines connections between lifelong learning, citizenship, and fiction writing, this paper considers how using fiction might enhance creative teaching opportunities. After providing a brief overview of the study, an example from the research is given of an author/professor who developed a course that incorporates artistic elements such as fiction writing in a MBA program. The paper concludes by arguing that even within professional fields such as Business, universities need to provide creative pedagogical learning opportunities.

Current contexts for higher education

Historically, universities were developed to provide broad educational learning experiences and foster democratic learning opportunities (Williams, 2008). In recent years, severe cutbacks in funding, changing student populations, and a neoliberal environment has created escalating pressures to ensure higher education leads to better employment opportunities for learners. As industry and the corporate sector gain influence in academe, they are given more power in determining university curriculum (Barrow, 2010; Jongbloed, Enders & Salerno, 2008). Within the UK accountability around teaching is narrowly construed within measurements that ignore the inherent ‘messiness’ of academic work (Malcolm & Zukas, 2009). Ever expanding managerialism in higher education makes it challenging to create opportunities for teaching that fosters creativity and criticality.

Teaching fiction across disciplinary boundaries

Knowledge is organized within higher education into particular subject areas that have evolved over time (Tight, 2003). Malcolm & Zukas (2009) note that “teaching is often expressed as a disciplinary activity through which both the students and the teachers are enabled to produce disciplinary knowledge” (p. 499). Fiction reading/writing is usually assigned to English, and is often not perceived to be relevant in other disciplines. However, there could be value in considering how fiction reading and writing may be used to develop creative pedagogical strategies in a wide range of teaching/learning contexts in higher education which would involve crossing over disciplinary boundaries.

While in recent years there has been some research into using narrative within different programs in higher education (McCormack, 2009; Lutovac & Kaasila, 2011), there has been

little research on using fiction in different disciplines. Persson and Persson (2008) reflect upon using film and fiction in a pharmaceutical education program that they teach in Sweden. Irvine (2008) has a handbook for educators on *Teaching the Novel Across the Curriculum*. US religious educator Siejk (2009) discusses an example of using a fictional novel to critically explore Christian beliefs. Williams (2008) and Symes (2004) both argue that an examination of novels written in academic settings could be used for teaching about conflicts, contextual issues, and debates pertaining to the ideals and values connected to higher education.

The Study

This qualitative research study includes life history interviews with over thirty authors, mostly Canadian, as well as a few American and UK authors that are included for comparative purposes, to explore the processes of learning connected to fiction writing. In addition, interviews with key informants in the education, policy and community sector are included to explore how fiction writing and reading may be better supported and developed in various contexts, including higher education.

Using fiction across disciplines

American crime fiction writer, Cathy Pickens, is a professor in a Masters of Business Administration program where she developed a course called *Developing Your Creative Process*. She recalls:

I was sitting and listening to ...a banker who had started to do not-for-profit work. He said, Every company should hire an artist-in-residence. And in my head I'm screaming, No! Your place is full of artists and you abuse them; you kill their creativity. I work in a place where they let you play with things so I said, I want to teach a class on creativity; they said, Okay.

To do this course, students

select an extended project of their own to do with a mentor [which may include fiction writing]. A lot of them come back and say that it was the most transforming thing that they've done. For some it just doesn't work. It depends on what you put into it. More than seventy-five percent of them, which I consider a passing grade for myself, will come away from that and look at their work and their life in a different way.

Teaching that incorporates creative approaches, such as fiction writing, may be met with resistance, but if students and faculty are willing to take chances, it can also enhance and broaden learning opportunities.

Opportunities for creative learning

Stewart (2010) points out that although Business has become the most popular major in the United States,

it is curious that at the very time that questions are being raised about the relevance of a liberal university education, there are calls for changes in the “relevant” business degree that suggest the need for greater liberal education and skills and character traits that have traditionally been associated with a liberal education (pp. 245-246). Similarly, Martha Nussbaum (2010) writes, “leading business educators with whom I have spoken in the United States say that they trace some of our biggest disasters – the failure of certain phases of the NASA space shuttle program, the even more disastrous failures of Enron and WorldCom – to a culture of yes-people, where authority and peer pressure ruled the roost and critical ideas were never articulated (p. 53).

Rather than limiting opportunities for learning to narrowly delineated course objectives aligned to the perceived needs of employers, creative approaches to teaching need to be developed that can cross over disciplinary boundaries to foster critical and engaged learners.

References

- Barrow, C.W. (2010). The Rationality Crisis in Higher Education. *New Political Science*. 32(2), 317-344.
- Irvine, C. [Ed.] (2009). *Teaching the Novel Across the Curriculum: A Handbook for Educators*. Westport, CT: Greenwood Press.
- Jongbloed, B., Enders, J. & Salerno, C. (2008). Higher education and its communities: Interconnections, interdependencies and a research agenda. *Higher Education*. 56(3), 303-324.
- Lutovac, S. & Kassila, R. (2011). Beginning a pre-service teacher’s mathematical identity work Through narrative rehabilitation and bibliotherapy. *Teaching in Higher Education*. 16(2), 225-236.
- Malcolm, J. & Zukas, M. (2009). Making a mess of academic work: experiences, purpose and identity. *Teaching and Higher Education*. 14(5) 495-506.
- McCormack, C. (2009). Stories return personal narrative ways of knowing to the professional development of doctoral supervisors. *Studies in Continuing Education*. 31(2), 141-156.
- Nussbaum, M. (2010). *Not for profit: Why democracy needs the humanities*. New Jersey: Princeton UP.
- Persson, I.A.L. & Persson, K. (2008). Fiction and film as teaching instruments in higher health care education. *Journal of Further and Higher Education*. 32(2) 111-118.
- Schlegal, W.M. (2011). Creating Interdisciplinary Science Programs: Purposes, Progress, Potholes. *Peer Review*. 13(3), 11-14.
- Siejk, C. (2009). Fiction and Religious Education: Be Not Afraid. *Religious Education*. 104(4), 420-436.
- Stewart D. W. (2010) The Purpose of a University Education. *Psychologist-Manager Journal*. 13(4), 244-250.
- Symes, C. (2004). Revolting campuses: novel impressions of Australian higher education.

- Teaching in Higher Education*. 9(4), 395-406.
- Tights, M. (2003). The Organisation of Academic Knowledge. *Higher Education*. 46, 389-410.
- Williams, J.J. (2008). Teach the University. *Pedagogy*. 8(1), 25-42.