

Cultivating wisdom: Fostering critically reflective learning through an interdisciplinary approach to university teaching that draws upon fiction writing and reading (0246)

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Within a neoliberal climate whereby students are viewed as mass market consumers and issues around accountability and assessment are at the forefront of academic discussions, developing the capacity for learners to become critically reflective or to cultivate 'wisdom' may be perceived as an outmoded approach for the purpose of a university education. The study of fiction writing and reading may be seen as impractical in that there is no apparent, immediate relevance to the market economy.

Yet there are fears that the emphasis on providing skills to a wider population means some of the underlying values of a university education are being lost in terms of teaching people to think critically and analytically. Many educators believe that universities should help prepare learners to engage as citizens as well as workers (Hunt, 2007; Nelson Lair, Nisdodé-Dossett & Kuk, 2007). There are concerns that if higher education becomes a process of production and mass consumption this may water down the capacity of universities to create opportunities for deeper kinds of learning (Star & Hunter, 2008).

Current debates around student engagement and learning raise issues about the types of pedagogical practices that should be supported within universities (Ertl & Wright, 2008). Star and Hammer argue that 'in societies saturated with information, the ability to master knowledge, rather than be mastered by it, is the hallmark of both a capable knowledge worker and a good citizen' (2008, p. 240). This paper draws upon a Social Science and Humanities Research Council funded study to consider how an interdisciplinary approach that integrates fiction writing and reading may inform university curriculum to foster deeper and more holistic approaches to learning. Cultivating 'wisdom' means that university educators have to do more than disseminate knowledge – they must teach learners to engage critically, reflectively and creatively with the learning process.

Changing Student Population and Student Learning

Today, many university students are older, studying on a part-time basis, often via distance, and may come from diverse backgrounds and international contexts. As a consequence, opportunities to create student engagement in learning exist primarily within classrooms, whether they are virtual or on-site. Nelson Lair, Niskodé-Dossett & Kuh (2009) note that students' learning experiences are largely determined by what skills faculty emphasize through their pedagogical practices, thus noting the importance of incorporating the liberal arts within universities for teaching students to think critically, develop better writing skills, and be open-minded around diversity issues.

Interdisciplinary Learning

Hunt (2007) argues that one strategy for teaching within higher education is to use a critical interdisciplinary approach. Dillon (2008) explores the benefits of educational opportunities that cross disciplinary boundaries in which students realize that even though learning may occur within a particular subject area, there are linkages and overlaps to other disciplines.

In a traditional, full time liberal arts degree, students may take courses in philosophy, social sciences, history and English. They quickly learn that knowledge can be construed or understood in various ways, and that different disciplines have unique approaches to categorizing, organizing, and making sense of the world. For example, the concept of the family unit when studied in the context of an English novel, as an economic unit of analysis, a philosophical concept, or a sociological issue, reveals the complexity of any one topic of research.

Given many students are now in professional degrees that focus on workplace skills, and that their studies may be part-time and fit in around multiple other demands on their time, university faculty need to consider alternative strategies for creating a holistic approach to education.

Fiction Writing and Reading

One way to help learners realize that knowledge is constructed in many different and complicated ways would be to introduce fiction writing and reading throughout the curriculum in a variety of contexts. Burksaitiene and Tereviciene (2008) note that “writing has lately become particularly important at different levels and in different domains of education, including higher education curricula” (2008, p. 159). In a study where library patrons assessed their own learning experiences, Moyer noted that reading fiction ‘helped them learn about other perspectives, challenge their own ideas and assumptions, and made them think in a different way’ (2007, p. 74).

Shapiro, Kasman and Shafer (2006) discuss a medical education program that incorporates various forms of creative writing, including narrative, short story, poetry and memoirs, where medical students have to reflect upon various issues such as patient relationships and concerns, and share their writing with others. Jubas (2005) provides an insightful example of how adult educators might use draw upon fiction such as Rohinton Mistry’s (1995) novel, *A Fine Balance*, to explore complex issues around globalization, gender and class inequalities, and notions of human capital. From her research on women learners drawing upon their own choices in popular fiction in a cultural studies course, Jarvis argues that as educators ‘we encourage the exploration of new forms and encourage students to critique those that they already know and love’ (2003, p. 274), so having learners use fiction reading can foster a more critical capacity for learning.

‘Wise Thoughts’

In our interview with renowned Canadian writer, Alistair MacLeod, he noted that ‘The great thing about literature...is that it nearly always has characters... Sometimes if you just study history...which is full of characters as well, but sometimes you just say in 1492 this happened, and in 1867, this happened and you can...memorize dates but not know about the people who were living at that time.’

Through integrating fiction into curriculum, learners may gain ‘wisdom’ by learning to think more deeply about how people’s experiences are shaped by events, what

their beliefs are, or even, as MacLeod notes, ‘what their worries are.’ Fiction reading and writing has the potential to foster critically reflective educational experiences and to create linkages in learning across disciplinary boundaries, enabling learners to gain insights into their own lives and the complexities of the world in which they live.

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