What’s in a flash?: Teaching reading and writing (and beyond) through flash fiction

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Abstract
Literature teaching (and the teaching of reading, in general) is challenged by many rivals with which it competes for the attention and interest of the younger generation called the ‘digital natives.’ This article introduces flash fiction as one possible way to regain the interest of the young to journey and explore the interesting world of literature. Flash fiction as bite-sized stories may be a less intimidating yet challenging (because it requires rich language) venue for learners to develop their creative reading and writing skills. This article begins with a concise discussion on the problem of reading among young people nowadays, and then proceeds with an introduction of flash fiction as a literary genre. Most importantly, the paper discusses the place of flash fiction in the academe and offers practical knowledge on the use of the said literary genre in the teaching of reading and writing.

Keywords: flash fiction, literature, literary genre, teaching of reading and writing

Introduction
Literature teaching (and the teaching of reading, in general) is confronted by several seemingly insurmountable problems nowadays. Literature is challenged by many rivals with which it competes for the attention and interest of the younger generation called the ‘digital natives.’ The television, movies, and the Internet lure them away from reading, and the problem of reading among students and young people has become one of the pressing concerns nowadays (Sadykova, Yashina, & Sharafieva, 2014). According to Kamalova and Koletvinova (2016), “The decline of interest in reading is a worldwide trend of globalization of media and the rapid development of the entertainment industry, displacing reading as a prestigious source of information and as a pleasant and prestigious form of leisure” (p. 473). They added that recent studies of clinical psychologists found that young people have gradually started to clip the perception of information, which means that short messages, hyperlinks, and clicks are now replacing the deep and thoughtful reading of works. So how can literature remain relevant to the needs of time?

Introducing flash fiction (FF, for brevity), which has been receiving considerable attention in the digital age, is one possible way to regain the interest of the young to journey and explore the interesting world of literature. With its brevity, crisp language, and special diction, FF as a literary genre seems fitting to be a vehicle for communication in the digital age.
Flash fiction as a literary genre

Society has evolved into becoming an ‘instant’ world nowadays. Because of modernity, the society has to compete with time, making everything quicker and faster, thus the advent of ‘instant.’ Everything seems to be instant: the clothes people wear, food they eat, music they listen to, and a lot more. With the use of technological devices, for instance, people want faster processors, instant searches, and quicker downloads. It seems that there is always something more important people need to rush to, and this tends to form part of their instant experiences.

In this society of ‘instant’ emerges people’s willingness to explore and create miniatures, particularly among artists. According to Nelles (2012), “Our contemporary society has been especially prolific of miniature art forms, such as post cards, pop songs (and their accompanying videos), television commercials, and bumper stickers” (p. 87). Where does literature reside in this array of miniature and ‘instant’ art forms, from its creation (by a writer) and its consumption (by a reader)? Some traditional short poetic forms, such as sonnets, haikus, and epigrams, have been distinguished as literary genres. At present, too, it seems that very short prose works have gradually developed as miniature narrative genre, variously called flash fiction (coined by Shapard & Thomas in 2007; for consistency, this term is used generally in the paper), microfiction, sudden fiction, “short” short fiction, short-shorts, pocket-size story, smoke-long story (just long enough to be read when smoking a cigar), and many others. Just like any other social media, such a miniscule narrative called FF, with its compressed nature (and intensity), has the ‘immediacy of a newsfeed.’

As a short form of storytelling, FF does not have a clear definition as a genre in terms of length, for such varies from writer to writer and from editor to editor—one may say that a story be told in less than 100 words; another, less than 300 words or 1,500 words. Whatever its length, FF presumably has the elements of a classic story such as plot, setting, characters, point of view, conflict, and resolution. As compared with traditional short stories though, the word limit in FF can mean that some of these elements are unwritten, thus are implied in the storyline (Lucht, 2014). However, according to Galef (2016), leaving out such elements can make a fictive writing appear more expansive; thus, FF depends on the art of implication or suggestion rather than statement. Likewise, a significantly brief story is assumed to have employed techniques (e.g., formal, stylistic, structural features) that are compatible with its shortness (Taha, 2000). According to Dr. Augusto Antonio A. Aguila, a professor of literature at the University of Santo Tomas, Manila, the Philippines, “Flash fiction, as a literary genre, is a type of fiction in which the writer shows all the necessary story details in 500-1000 words. In flash fiction, the writer exercises ‘control’ to convey as much as possible a single dominant impression of life” (personal communication, July 4, 2016). Masih (2009) defines FF as fictional short, short stories that link to human experiences and calls it a “story miniature” (p. xi). Along with the word limit is the creative way of maintaining a powerful narrative that can surprise a reader and allow him to think about the relevant issues surrounding the text (Batchelor, 2012). In this case, while a reader can read a very short story while waiting in line to get a cup of coffee or sitting in traffic or while smoking a cigarette, FF is not merely a time killer, but it leaves a lasting impression that encourages the reader to use context, put more concentration on details, and extend his imagination (Barr, 2010).
Flash fiction in the academe

The popularity of the FF genre likewise has found its niche in the academe. In the US, FF (with the increasing number of courses devoted to it) has begun to come mingle with several other literary genres in the academic canon such as the following anthology pieces: Raymond Carver’s “Popular Mechanics” (434 words), Julio Cortázars “A Continuity of Parks” (639 words), and Jamaica Kincaid’s “Girl” (660 words) (Nelles, 2012). Meanwhile, in the Philippines, the K to 12 Senior High School Core Curriculum for the 21st Century Literature from the Philippines and the World prepared by the Department of Education (2013) covers FF as a literary genre in a specific item for its Content:

B. Study and appreciation of literary texts from the different regions written in different genres covering: 1. regions in Luzon, Visayas, Mindanao; 2. major genres (poetry, fiction, drama, creative nonfiction, as well as hyperpoetry, blogs, mobile phone Texttula, chick lit, speculative fiction, flash fiction, etc.) (p. 2, emphasis, added)

FF, furthermore, serves well in providing meaningful and purposeful reading and writing experiences. It helps enhance students’ knowledge in understanding narrative elements such as characterization and foreshadowing techniques, which in turn, assist them in crafting their less than 750-word stories using their skills in narrative writing, with focus on clarity and concision (Batchelor & King, 2014). In a writing class, FF seems to appeal to the interest of students who always search for avenues through which they can freely express themselves.

In their attempt to introduce FF as a genre for high school writing, Batchelor and King (2014) were able to prove that ‘less is more.’ They explored how FF could be used to develop students’ narrative writing skills. Based on their action research, they concluded: “The genre flash fiction provides opportunities for students to learn about craft while reading high quality mentor texts and modeling author techniques in their own writing” (p. 111).

Teaching reading and writing (and beyond) through flash fiction

Just like any other shorter forms of literature, FF may be considered as the world where the future of literary fiction is headed (Nelles, 2012). FF is burgeoning, and a significant number of these stories are published in journals or online magazines called e-zines; thus, teachers cannot afford to discount FF’s relevance in the classroom. Fox (2016) listed in his blog the top 24 websites for flash fiction, e.g., 3 AM Magazine, with approximately 85,000 visitors monthly; Flash Fiction Online, 35,000 visitors monthly; Word Riot, 25,000 visitors monthly; Everyday Fiction, 22,000 visitors monthly; Brevity, 20,000 visitors monthly. Likewise, FF’s relevance as a contemporary form of expression can be attributed to the rise of technology and social media such as microblogging platforms (Shapard, 2012); thus, FF pieces become more accessible, in a blended learning setup, as potentially authentic instructional materials because they can be taken from and shared through social networking sites (SNS) such as Facebook (popular Facebook groups are available for FF enthusiasts, e.g., Flash Fiction Lovers, International Flash Fiction Network). FF pieces as bite-sized stories may be a less intimidating yet challenging (because FF requires rich language) venue for the learners to start with their own creative reading and writing (Conde & López, 2012). FF has unique offerings for teaching particular reading strategies such as making inferences and predictions, and utilizing context clues. It is expected that each reader
or learner might intuit something different, but such is an advantage to strengthen the impact of a story and make it more emotionally resonant.

With its crisp language and extreme brevity, FF may be appealing to young readers who are more visual learners. Teachers may introduce FF in class by facilitating a discussion on how some of the learners’ favorite songs and music videos can tell stories and relate emotions in a three-minute span. From this notion, the students may initially acquaint themselves with the nature of FF—“sharing a story, leaving the reader wanting more, all in one sitting” (Batchelor & King, 2014, p. 114).

However, since language is a symbolic system and processing it is more cognitive than visual, the students may be confronted with challenges when reading or processing FF, given that the said genre is purposefully ambiguous. To address this concern, mentor FF textscan be utilized to engage the students in text processing. Incorporating mentor texts can assist students to learn more about a particular genre by providing opportunities to study how writers craft their sentences and use techniques distinctive to a specific genre (Dorfman & Cappelli, 2007; Lattimer, 2003; Ray, 2006). Teachers may invite students to read one FF at a time on their own and record or note their thoughts. Afterward, the students may work in pairs or small groups to share their observations about the FF piece, discussing the plot, setting, character(s), and theme of the story; the questions the text raises (i.e., the implied or unwritten); the literary devices used, the striking words or phrases that bear connotative meanings, and the like. In this manner, the learners can pay more attention to language and realize its power in literary interpretation. Reading flash fiction can enhance students’ reading comprehension, allowing them to visualize stories and match what they “see” with what the text says (Mader, 2019). It encourages them to process things in small, bite-sized pieces, which has become part of any culture. For instance, in one of the FF pieces written by novelist Curtis Sittenfeld titled “The Femur,”

“The Femur” by Curtis Sittenfeld

On my 21st birthday, my father revealed two facts about himself: that he was colorblind and that before I was born, he’d served four years for armed robbery. I suspect the colorblind disclosure was a test of my maturity, and if I’m right, I must have barely passed. After he told me, I became petulant and said, “I just think it’s really weird you hid that for my whole life.”

the following questions may be raised: (1) Who are the characters, and what is the plot, setting, and theme of the story?; (2) What questions does the text raise?; (3) What things are unsaid?; (4) What literary devices are employed?; (5) How “complete” is the story?; (6) How do you read this story differently from the manner you read a longer text?; and (7) What does this story offer that a longer piece does not?

FF is not only useful in teaching reading. FF can be a tool for enhancing second-language performance and for harnessing academic skills beyond second language acquisition. There seems to be creative possibilities that FF can offer for language learning, which include teaching critical thinking, encouraging oral interaction, and honing vocabulary, grammar, and writing skills. In teaching critical thinking, given that FF’s language is ambiguous, teachers may give open-ended questions that tackle implied ideas from the story (e.g., Did you sympathize with the character’s actions?). In this way, the students may be engaged in oral interaction, and this can be an appropriate venue where literature shines.
Providing students with opportunities to read FF pieces as mentor texts and eventually making them write ‘short’ short stories themselves can be a powerful tool for them to “contextualize and situate their own language and experiences within the stories of other writers” (Newman, 2012, p. 25). In this manner, the students would learn how to value precision in language, truth in communicating an experience, and empathy for others. They can likewise use FF as a platform to voice the human experience or condition and deal with deep concepts such as death and suffering. Through this, reading and writing FF serve a purpose outside improving one’s academic performance or getting better grades, that is, igniting a flame for reading and writing among students. For instance, writing skills developed through their exposure to the linguistic features of FF can be useful in writing their personal blogs, which can be simple, small, but meaningful, and not demeaning to any person or group.

Furthermore, introducing FF may help develop students’ specific writing skills such as concision, organization, and style. In fact, developing a flash story and telling it in a small space demands imagination and originality. FF can challenge students to play with the key elements of cohesive, concise, and creative writing (Anderson, n.d.). For example, teachers can challenge the students to condense a classroom text, say a classic short story or a novel, into a flash fiction piece using 450 to 1,000 words. Despite the ambiguous nature of FF, the students, in crafting their mini-masterpieces, would need to consider what is essential to the text under construction, focusing on character(s), setting, plot (i.e., a defining moment in time), and theme, and economizing their wording (Budman, 2009). Another possible prompt for FF is to ask the students to write a very short story that revolves around an article of clothing such as a hat, a pair of shoes, and the like. The article or item does not need to be the primary focus of attention, but it may act as a symbol of imagination and a trigger to a relevant aspect of the story that conveys greater meaning (Leslie, 2009). This suggested activity encases the essence of precision, conciseness, cohesion, and creativity in writing.

Conclusion

Although products of modern technology have produced an audience growing increasingly (or seemingly) intolerant of lengthy texts, FF, as highly charged very short stories, still links the communication lines between people and the literary artists. The ‘alternative reality,’ which FF presents, does not exist in the physical world but in the consciousness of a character or a narrator the readers still have to relate with. FF challenges the readers to (re)construct for themselves fictional worlds that are formed through the consciousness of characters, often transcribed in purposefully ambiguous style(s) and poetic structures; in this way, FF, despite its brevity, provides a platform where literary appreciation shines.

At the heart of the foregoing discussion is the idea of the richness of literature, in itself and by itself, and its potentials as a pedagogical tool. Such a reminder might be necessary in this viewing age, in this age of ‘instant.’

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