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The Impact of Group Formation Method (Student-Selected vs. Teacher- Assigned) on the Results of Community Model of Teaching Creative Writing

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the
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To everyone who taught me, inspired me and kept me inspired

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List of Abbreviations

EFL...English as a Foreign Language

ESL..English as a Second Language

ILS...Index of Learning Style

NCTE..National council of Teachers of English

Abstract

The Impact of Group Formation Method (Student-Selected vs. Teacher- Assigned) on the

Results of Community Model of Teaching Creative Writing

This study investigated how group formation method, namely student-selected vs. teacher-assigned, influences the results of the community model of teaching creative writing; i.e., group dynamics and group outcome (the quality of performance). The study adopted an experimental comparison group and microgenetic research design to observe the change process over a relatively short period of time. Two intact classes of junior English Literature students (N=32) participated in this study over one academic semester. Community model was employed to teach creative writing to both classes, but the communities formed in the classes differed in terms of their grouping method. In other words, while in one class students (N=16) self-selected their working partners, in the other the teacher (based on the homogeneity of the students' learning styles) assigned them (N=16) into groups. The data for this study were collected through students' initial writing drafts, revised texts and an end of the course written report (for students to comment on aspects of group dynamics). One way repeated measures Analysis Of Variance (ANOVA) and content analysis were used for analyzing the quantitative and qualitative data respectively. The findings revealed a significant difference between the two group formation conditions regarding group outcome. In particular, although students of teacher-assigned group formation method reported no definite advantage over those of student-selected grouping in terms of group dynamics, they noticeably outperformed participants from student-selected grouping condition. However, the outcome of group works implies that teacher-assigned groups are more task oriented (a key aspect of group dynamics) and are thus more successful at accomplishing group task-here revision- (as evidenced by the quality of performance). In brief, the results suggest that group work as such does not guarantee success. Group formation method also should be seen as a key factor contributing to the success of group work.

Key words: Creative Writing, Community Model, Student-Selected Group Formation Method, Teacher-Assigned Group Formation Method

Chapter One: Introduction

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1.1. Background

Writing instruction received increased attention at the turn of 20th century throughout higher education. As a result, English Composition emerged as a field totally committed to writing. One of the primary purposes of composition, according to Myers (1996), was to incorporate practice of literature. Although early composition courses did not aim at production of literary genres, they rigorously refrained from grammatical and rhetorical correctness and instead focused on the student writer and personal writing (Myers considers this as a precedent for today's creative writing). However, by the 1920s some external pressures forced English composition to focus more on fundamental proficiency needs of students. This shift of focus, Myers argues, provided an opportunity for emergence of two other kinds of writing courses: (1) Journalism as a response to need for professional training, and (2) creative writing as a response to need for self-expression.

Concurrently, US high school curriculum was undergoing a substantive shift. It was during late 19th century that a pedagogical movement called Progressive Education Movement began as a rant against traditional teacher-centered curriculum and promulgated a student-centered curriculum which strived for learners' creativity and self-expression. Following the rapid rise of this movement throughout schools and universities in US, creative writing found its way into English language curriculum. Myers (1996) claims that it was Norman Forster who entered University of Iowa in 1930 and established creative writing as a distinct university course for the first time. Then, after seven years in 1937, Engle started Iowa Writers Workshop and from that time it became the standard pedagogy of the field. In other words, Forster and later Engle were among those who significantly contributed to the emergence and development of creative writing throughout history.

Since then, the question of whether creative writing can be taught or not has occupied the field's pedagogy. The argument rests on the common misconception that talent, as an internal human quality, is the sole source of creativity which can be derived by inspiration rather than education (Swander, Leahy, & Cantrell, 2007). However, May (2007), like many others, criticizes the assumption and argues that creative writing encompasses various principles and techniques which necessitate high degrees of practice. He further highlights that it is in the *what* and *how* to practice that lies the value of teaching creative writing.

Creative writing has been taught through different methods throughout history: (a) great works approach (as the oldest approach, it requires students to imitate the techniques, forms and even content of great works of classical writers which are chosen by the instructor), (b) atelier approach (prevalent during the 19th century, it entails a one- to- one instruction between a teacher who is usually a great author and a student), (c) inspiration approach (emerged during the 19th century, it assumes that creativity is an individual activity for which inspiration rather than education matters and in turn seeks efficient ways of inspiring writing apprentices), (d) techniques approach (as a late 20th century approach, it entails practice with proper techniques of writing through teacher's illustration of certain techniques through exemplification), (e) workshop approach (beginning at the late 20th century and continuing up to now, workshop refers to a group of students who provide feedback to one another's work and are led by a master whose main job is to facilitate the workshop discussion), and (f) feminist approach (as the most recent methodology, it aims to create a collaborative classroom space in which peer groups especially women work toward the discovery and development of their unique voice) (Blythe & Sweet, 2008).

Out of the six approaches mentioned above, workshop model has occupied the field's pedagogy as if there is no other alternative. Blythe and Sweet (2008) highlight this predominance by maintaining "Thou shall use the workshop and nothing but the workshop"

(p. 306). Recent surveys have also proved the workshop's pervasiveness in the field. May's (2003) as well as Donnelly's (2011) survey of universities which offer creative writing courses across UK reported workshops of 10 to 25 as the most dominant teaching method.

However, due to the numerous underlying problems of workshop model (gag rule, fault-finding mode, too much competitive environment and so forth), scholars (Bogen, 1984; Healey, 2009; Wilson, 2010) have begun to propose alternative approaches for teaching creative writing. Community model (Blythe & Sweet, 2008) is one of the recent revolutionary methods which has addressed many of those problems. Community model entails the formation of intimate groups (communities) that engage in small workshops where they analyze one another's writing. More significantly, the groups are mentored by an instructor whose main job is to facilitate discussion about techniques and revision (Blythe & Sweet, 2008).

During her experience with community model, Kostelnik (2010) questions its student-selected method of group formation arguing that students are not capable of forming effective working groups. Thus, the present study aims to investigate the issue of group composition as an attempt to examine how it might influence the results of community model.

1.2. Statement of the Problem

This study targeted a serious issue in the field of creative writing- that is, the underdeveloped nature of its pedagogy. Several research studies have proposed methods for teaching creative writing (Berg, 2010; Bogen, 1984; Blythe & Sweet, 2008; Healey, 2009; McLoughlin, 2008; Wilson, 2010). Nonetheless, their effectiveness is not empirically investigated. Community model is among one of those revolutionary methods which has criticized many of the underlying principles of teaching practices of the field. However,

student-selected method of group formation as the key principle of the model has been

recently questioned. In fact, the argument rests on the assumption that students are not able

enough to form effective working groups. Thus, this study aims to investigate whether and to

what extent the method of group formation, namely student-selected vs. teacher-assigned

grouping influences the results of community model. In particular, it examines how the

choice of group members would influence group dynamics as well as group outcome (as

evidenced by quality of performance).

1.3. Significance of the Study

When it comes to pedagogy, creative writing lags far behind its composition counterpart.

Workshopping is the main channel through which creative writing has been taught for more

than one decade. This mode of presentation has continued to dominate teaching practices of

the field not because inquiry offers testimony to its effectiveness but because little research

has interrogated its underlying principles and procedures.

It is only recently that scholars have begun to explore the pedagogy of the discipline.

Several studies have tried to identify the problems of current teaching practices (workshop)

(James, 2009; Kearns, 2009; Leahy, 2010; May, 2003; Starkey, 2010), while others have

proposed alternative approaches (Berg, 2010; Bogen, 1984; Blythe & Sweet, 2008; Healey,

2009; McLoughlin, 2008; Wilson, 2010). However, there are few, if any, studies that

specifically deal with their implementation in classroom setting to inquire about their

effectiveness.

This study implements community model of teaching creative writing as an attempt to

investigate the efficiency of its group formation method (student-selected). Thus, it presents

an important step in exploring one of the pedagogical issues raised in the field. Besides, the

results can be extended to subjects other than creative writing. In other words, it would shed some light on how groups can be successfully formed in any classroom setting.

Furthermore, the study addresses one of the major concerns of the field, that of creativity assessment. In fact, the study furthered previous research on creative writing assessment by proposing an analytical rubric for assessing creativity in writing (see Methodology section).

1.4. Objectives of the Study

This study aims to investigate how group formation method (student-selected vs. teacher-assigned) might influence the result of community model of teaching creative writing. Specifically, it aims to explore whether the choice of group member influences group dynamics as well as the outcome of group work (development of creative writing ability as manifested in final grades). Additionally, development of an analytical rubric for creative writing assessment was part of the objective of the current study.

1.5. Research Questions

This study addresses the following questions:

1. Does community model of teaching creative writing improve students' creative writing ability (regardless of group formation method)?

2. Does group dynamics vary across the two group formation methods (student-selected vs. teacher-assigned)? If yes, how?

3. Does group outcome vary across the two group formation methods (student-selected vs. teacher-assigned)? If yes, how?

1.6. Research Hypotheses

This study followed three hypotheses:

H1: Community model of teaching creative writing at large may improve students' creative writing ability.

H2: Group dynamics may vary across student-selected vs. teacher-assigned group formation methods.

H3: Group outcome may vary across student-selected vs. teacher-assigned group formation methods.

1.7. Definition of Key Terms

The following terms are used throughout the thesis and are defined below:

Creative writing

Creative writing has received various definitions throughout its history: It is a matter of hearing your own voice (Berry, 1994), a form of "literary writing" (Radavich, 1999, p. 106), a mode of writing that conveys thought in an imaginative way (Wandor, 2008), a kind of daydreaming in adulthood (Freud, 1959, as cited in Vakil, 2008), the production of personal texts that have an aesthetic value rather than an instrumental or informative purpose (Maley, 2012) or in Caffield-vile's (1998, as cited in Harmer, 2007) words, it is a kind of journey to discover yourself. A more detailed and more descriptive definition is given by Haake (2010) who considers it as a kind of fine art as she asserts, "creative writing is a language-based art saturated with images and narrative and characterized by the free and immediate circulation of personal expression of all kinds" (p. 182).

Community model

As a recent model of teaching creative writing, writing community serves as a set of small-scale workshops with 3-5 group members who criticize each other's work prior to class session. During class, every group presents the strengths and weaknesses of each work to the

instructor whose main job is to facilitate the discussion. Altogether, the primary purpose is to

work toward some revision strategies as an attempt to further develop the work (Blythe &

Sweet, 2008).

Student-selected group formation method

A method of group formation in which students are allowed to select their working

partners themselves (Harmer, 2007).

Teacher-assigned group formation method

A method of group formation in which the teacher assigns students to groups based on

some specific criteria (academic level, learning style, etc.) (Harmer, 2007).

1.8. The Outline of the Study

Followed by an overall introduction, the second chapter gives an overview of various

approaches through which creative writing has been historically taught as well as the new

models which has been recently proposed. This is followed by a detailed description of

principles and procedures of community model upon which this study is based. Since the

primary purpose is to explore the efficiency of its group formation method (student-

selected), issues related to group composition and the findings from previous studies are

further discussed.

Chapter three explicates the method employed to conduct this study. Specifically, it

provides a background for the participants, illustrates the data collection instruments and the

two phases among which the data collection procedures were divided and details the

procedures followed to analyze the collected data.

Chapter four entails the results of the data analysis. Findings are presented under two

categories of creative writing samples and written reports. Chapter five primarily discusses