

Teaching with Metafiction: Cultivating Student Confidence With An Experimental Genre

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I. Introduction

Once I registered at UMD as a Teaching Communication Arts and Literature major I was expecting to encounter a wide variety of literary genres. Unfortunately, I never had the opportunity in any of my literature-centric courses to examine, in detail, the genre of metafiction. The initial objective of this study was to research metafiction in order to get some exposure to it.

When it comes to literary genres, ‘metafiction’ is far from what would be considered a household name. Due to the convoluted nature of the genre, this obscurity is perfectly understandable. In 1970, critic William H. Gass coined the term metafiction in his essay “Philosophy and the Form of Fiction”. In his essay Gass defines metafiction as “forms of fiction [that] serve as material upon which further forms of fiction can be improvised”. Since then the genre has lent itself to many definitions and is easier to identify than the philosophical nature of Gass’ original definition may let on. Although inklings of the genre can be traced throughout the history of literature, it is safe to say that the seminal works of metafiction (i.e. John Barth’s *Lost in the Funhouse*, Thomas Pynchon’s *The Crying of Lot 49*) are lodged within the postmodern canon.

As a future secondary English teacher, I began to wonder whether or not metafiction could have a practical application in the classroom. One of the goals that I intend to set for myself within my profession is to build literary confidence within my classrooms. My determination to bolster the confidence of my future students can be traced to my seemingly endless well of personal observations of classmates who feel hopeless at the prospect of writing a paper or fear that they are up against insurmountable odds when pitted against a creative writing assignment. After no small degree of rumination I came up with the question that would be the focus of my first undergraduate research project: Can the study of metafiction lead to a positive effect in student writing confidence?

The reasoning behind my question was simple. The first thing that any student should know going into the language arts, is that no one can immediately grasp the skills of reading difficult texts, writing superb essays, or crafting an enlightening piece of poetry or prose. Novice writing students, myself included, are liable to become intimidated by the truly daunting task of crafting a creative work. I have found in my own experience that it is also easy to become discouraged about one’s own writing abilities after having read the work of masterful writers. While researching metafiction, I realized that the quintessentially self-conscious nature of the genre had the potential to serve as fertile grounds for students to think critically about the processes of great writers and subsequently, to think critically about their own.

II. Research Methodology

In order to explore my research question I devised a plan with my faculty mentor, Dr. Kathryn Van Wert, to lead a seminar of fifteen UMD creative writing students. The objective of the seminar was to gather data about the students’ writing processes and feelings about metafiction via survey and discussion. Once the student participants were selected for the project, I assigned three short stories that would prepare them for the activities required of them in the metafiction

seminar. The first was Flannery O'Connor's "The Crop", the second Tim O'Brien's "How To Tell A True War Story", and the third Jorge Luis Borges' "Borges and I". I chose these particular stories due to the self-conscious nature of their writing styles that I believed would provide sufficient intellectual fodder for the discussion that I hoped to invoke. The selection of short stories used the following metafictional devices: stories about writers writing a story and stories featuring another works of fiction within itself.

For clarity's sake, a brief introduction to each story should suffice for readers of this journal. O'Connor's "The Crop" brings us the story of Miss Willerton, a maid and aspiring writer who attempting to write a short story in the midst of her hectic daily life. Throughout the story readers are not only treated to O'Connor's unique brand of humor but also become immersed within the consciousness of Miss Willerton as she attempts to compose a short story of her own. O'Brien's "How To Tell A True War Story", originally part of his collection *The Things They Carried*, was the second story that the seminar participants were required to read. Beyond the straightforward flashbacks of Vietnam war trauma, the story offers a highly metafictional glimpse into the intricacies of storytelling. The selection from Borges, derived from the 'Parables' section of his *Labyrinths* collection, is a short piece in which the reader herself becomes a character within the text.

After signing an agreement that their survey answers would be used in my research, and agreeing to read the aforementioned short stories, the student participants were ready to participate in the seminar. The seminar was scheduled to transpire within the walls of UMD in the Humanities area of the school beginning at 8:00 a.m. and going until roughly 9:50 a.m. Throughout the duration of the seminar, the students were given two qualitative surveys (pre- and post-discussion) to gauge their feelings about metafiction. Between these surveys, they were given two writing prompts. The first of which asked them to describe their writing process and the second challenged them to start writing a creative piece using a metafictional device. Along with these writing intensive activities, the students participated in a brief discussion of the stories they had read and were treated to a showing of some clips from Spike Jonze's highly metafictional film *Adaptation*.

III. Findings

The seminar went off without a hitch thanks to the friendly participation of my volunteer subjects. When it was over, I was left with a treasure trove of intriguing student data from the surveys and writing prompts. For the purposes of this journal, I will analyze the surveys and prompts in the order they were administered on the day of the seminar. The "Findings" section of the journal is divided into four subsections (A: Pre-Discussion Survey, B: Writing Prompt 1, C: Writing Prompt 2, D: Post-Discussion Survey). Each subsection lists the questions and/or prompt that was offered to the students followed by my analysis of the entire groups feedback to the corresponding question. I will refer to particular questions as Qx (ex. Q3 = Question 3) for the remainder of my survey analyses in this journal.

A. Pre-Discussion Survey

1. What is your understanding of metafiction? Can you give a definition of the genre?

Analysis: The answers to Q1 proved that the students showed a basic understanding of metafiction. I expected there to be a semblance of familiarity among these college-aged English enthusiasts and many of the answers evinced a strong grasp on some basic elements of metafiction. Popular answers included “writing about writing” and “fiction about fiction”, but for every succinct definition there was an “I don’t know” and “I’m not sure how to describe it”. The most unique answer to Q1 said that the student was more familiar with metatheater. In retrospect this question may have been a little unfair to impress upon my participants. Metafiction is a decidedly opaque and multi-faceted genre and I still have problems describing it after a semester’s worth of research.

2. What kind of writing process have you learned throughout your school experiences?

Analysis: Q2 was a question that offered little diversity in its answers. The question was meant to gather information about the writing processes that their teachers had recommended or taught to them. Most of the responses described a typical draft-revise-peer edit-revise, five-paragraph-essay type of writing process that many students of my generation have experienced throughout their academic careers. However, there were a few students who misinterpreted the question as asking them to describe the unique writing processes (mostly for creative work) that they had picked up on throughout their academic careers. The misinterpretation told me that I had a lot to learn about the intricacies of writing survey questions, and while the answers were still interesting, I would get the information I was looking for about the students’ personal processes from the first of the writing prompts (See B.).

3. What are your challenges and strengths as a writer?

Analysis: Q3 provided a venue for the most revealing answers about the students’ personal writing processes. This was most helpful in speculating how the students related to the metafictional stories they had read for the seminar. Many of the process challenges that individual students confessed to experiencing in this survey were extremely similar among the subjects as a whole. The two most common challenges that my student writers faced were “sticking with their idea” and “brainstorming for initial ideas”. The eminence of these drawing board basics as common challenges may be a result of the students having been selected from Dr. Van Wert’s Writing Fiction course. Other challenges included external facets of the writing itself. “Finding the time to write (while working 40 hours a week)” is one answer that surfaced that many students can relate to. When it came to the strengths that the participants felt they possessed the most popular answer had to do with either the quality of their prose or the verbosity of their vocabulary.

4. List a few of the major influences on your writing.

Analysis: Q4 did not deal directly with the writing process, and it did not necessarily have anything to do with metafiction, but it was still a source of some interesting insight into the vast isthmus of influences that this group of students felt relevant enough to credit. The most popular writers included Ernest Hemingway, F. Scott Fitzgerald, William S. Burroughs, Thomas Pynchon, and T.S. Eliot. The majority of the authors listed by this group were American males, but only by a slim margin. I was happy to see that a variety of female and international authors were also included in the students answers. As indicated by the frequent appearances of John

Green, J.K. Rowling, and Suzanne Collins, it was clear to see that young adult literature was yet another influential fixture in the creative minds of these college writing students.

B. Writing Prompt 1

Prompt: In the form of a journal entry, describe the intimate details of your writing process.

Analysis: Based off of the quality of these writing process journals, I know that I will definitely want to use them frequently in classroom when it comes time for me to teach. A teacher can simply go through her career assuming that students will always have struggles in their writing process, but journals of this sort supply concrete specifics about the day-to-day writing process that a student undergoes. The foremost reason that writing process journals are a pedagogical gold mine lies within the records of student distraction that the pieces inevitably provide.

Before offering the prompt to the seminar I emphasized that total honesty and laborious detail would be graciously appreciated and the entries did not disappoint on either of these fronts. Many have derided the advent of smart phones as the arbiter of a technology-saturated generation; I could not agree more with this assertion. Websites like Tumblr.com were often cited as major distractions in these journals. From the modest collection of student writing that I was able to collect from the seminar participants it is blatantly clear that the biggest threat facing this demographic of student writers, and presumably all writers of this day and age, is the distraction of the internet. That being said, procrastination, the greatest threat to all writers (especially students) was also a recurring theme in the writing process journals.

C. Writing Prompt 2

Prompt: Begin writing a draft of a short story that uses a metafictional device.

Analysis: The participants, all of whom were concurrently enrolled in Dr. Van Wert's Writing Fiction course that spring, were already used to receiving off-the-cuff creative writing prompts during their hours in class. The pieces that they turned in for this seminar confirmed that they were ready to write just about anything with the aid of a thoughtful prompt and their staggeringly creative minds. Although confirmed in the post-discussion survey, it was plain to see that O'Connor's "The Crop" had been the biggest influence on these student writers when it came to metafictional devices. During the seminar, a few of the students shared that they felt metafiction was fun to write. I feel that as teacher it would be difficult to turn a whole high school class on to the idea of writing something as complex as metafiction, but I maintain the belief that the genre can still serve as an excellent gateway to metacognitive thinking about one's writing process.

D. Post-Discussion Survey

1. What do you "get" about metafiction that you did not understand prior to our discussion?

Analysis: I was happy to see that the majority of the answers to Q1 stated that the students had ended up with better understanding of metafiction as the result of the seminar. However, there was still notable minority who felt either equally knowledgeable or felt that their knowledge of the genre had not increased.

2. How did it feel writing about your own process? Was it helpful to you as a writer? Gauge your feelings (5 being most helpful) on a scale from 1-5.

Analysis: Q2 made it evident that the self-reflections on their writing processes had been worthwhile to most of the groups students. The qualitative score provided by the student participants was a solid 3.57; this does not, and cannot, include a fifteenth students who neglected to put down a number. The most popular 1-5 scale number selected was 4. These 4's were often accompanied by intriguing feedback:

“It made me realize what I should not be doing. It made me think about how I could improve my writing style.”

“I realized that I don't have much of a process. I don't know how I feel about that.”

“[Writing about your personal process] makes you reflect on how you spend your time and where you struggle and succeed most when writing. It also allows for insight on how your writing habits affect your stories.”

3. In preparation for our discussion, which metafictional short story did you enjoy the most? Which piece gave you the most guidance for your stylistic imitation piece?

Analysis: The overwhelming favorite for the story the students enjoyed most and were most influenced by was Flannery O'Connor's "The Crop". O'Brien's piece was also enjoyed, but it was never cited as an influence on the stylistic imitation piece that the students crafted for Writing Prompt 2. "Borges and I" had a small following and appreciation and was both enjoyable and influential to a small number of the students. I had predicted early on that "The Crop" would be the most thoroughly appreciated of the pieces. O'Connor's story was actually my primary inspiration for this entire project.

4. Ultimately, what do you feel are the takeaways from our discussion about metafiction? Has it changed how you think about yourself as a writer? Are you more confident or less?

Analysis: Q4 was pleasantly revealing and gave lots of positive feedback about the effect of the metafiction seminar. I was happy to see that many of results fell in line with predictions and hopes that I had had for the study. Some of the common threads throughout the student surveys had to do with achieving a higher level of confidence in their writing, and a better understanding of their process. The post-discussion survey indicates that both of my goals for the study (exposing students to metafiction and helping them build a more advanced understanding and awareness of personal writing processes) were both met to some extent.

IV. Conclusion

Overall, I had an excellent experience with this particular research project. Going into it I didn't expect any easy answers to come out of my work, but I am left with some indication that I may be onto something with the power of using metafiction in English classrooms. I am confident that the results from of my seminar suggest that the genre can have a positive effect on student

writing confidence. At the very least it gave the students a fresh and exciting type of literature to be challenged by, but it also allowed them to engage in some metacognition concerning their own writing processes. The diversity of the student data yielded from this study also serves as a reminder that there is no such thing as the 'typical' student writer.

I am convinced that metafiction is an excellent gateway into the kind of thinking that can make students into better writers, but I still have many questions about using metafiction in the classroom. Although introducing a literary genre of this complexity went smoothly for young people pursuing a high education, the question remains about whether or not the majority of middle and high school students (the age that I intend to educate) will respond well to the genre. I am most curious about how different ages of students will respond to metafiction, but I am also looking forward to gathering a larger harvest of data from a group of participants greater than a mere fifteen people. This initial study is only the tip of iceberg of the wide range of reactions and positive impacts that metafiction could have on student writers.

Bibliography

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