

Teaching Fiction: Challenges and Remedies for College Students and Instructors

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Abstract: I have been teaching fiction for a number of years and every time I walk into class to teach my students fiction, a short story or a novel, I get embarrassed to find out that my students who have taken courses such as “The Rise of the Novel, or “Introduction to Literature” still do not know to answer basic questions related to such courses. What is literature? What are the major genres of literature? What is fiction? What are the basic elements of fiction? These questions are fundamentals for literature students. Their inability of not answering them will cause big problems for college instructors presuming that students should have known these questions during the time they were students taking these courses above mentioned. These challenges rise when I first meet with my students taking fiction as university requirement. I ask them individually to answer these questions, to which they are unable to answer in good English. They just use words or phrases to answer, which adds a new challenge. There I have to stop and tell them. First, how to answer these questions using good English. Then I proceed with the answering the questions myself, so they are on the right

track from the first day of meeting with them. Thus, this paper discusses the challenges of teaching fiction and provides ways, methods or remedies to handle them. It provides benefits of reading fiction for students and teachers. Finally, it demonstrates the delivery plan offered by the college in which I teach and the changes I have made on the original plan so that both can suit and achieve the desired learning outcomes.

Keywords: *fiction and benefits, basic elements, the challenges of teaching it (and literature), remedies, and methodology.*

1. Teaching Literature, Fiction for EFL Students

It is unlikely possible for any instructor of English literature to teach fiction from the start of the course without making sure that students know what literature means and what its major genres are and, above all, what fiction means and what its basic elements are. Finally, he or she should tell his or her students how to read the material prescribed by college curriculum. My argument is based on the experiences of teaching courses such as “The Rise of the Novel,” “The Victorian Novel,” “Introduction to Literature,” and “The American Short Story” to EFL students at different academic levels of their study ranging from second to fourth year. It is my rule of thumb that when meeting students in class they

should answer the questions above mentioned. Consequently, instructors can handle literature courses as smoothly as possible: carrying out successfully, the teaching plan and the learning outcomes. “Good teaching can be assessed in a variety of ways: how well students perform on standardized tests; students should be viewed as being reflective critical thinkers, what sociological and philosophical connections students make to the community in which they live, and whether students know the basic skills of reading, writing and arithmetic” (Lane 2006:9). Lane is absolutely right when she mentions learning and writing as basic skills not only for language students but also for literature students. I keep telling my students that college students should maintain three things while on campus: a passion for research, reading critically and writing analytically. The syllabus requires students to write essays in which they have to reflect what they have gained in the course they take. With the aid of language, they can master it through any genre of literature. The more literature they read the better writers and readers they become. Research has proved the positive relationship between language and literature. “Literature is a key to language learning. Language and literature are always regarded as two inseparable entities. Literature is the heart of a language that manifests human language in a real sense. There is a close relationship between language and literature. Language and literature are intricately attached. Thus, literature is a part of our life though it is under cover of language. By studying literature, our range of the use of language increases. Literature contains diverse uses of language and various levels of discourse. So, literature is one of resources of language teaching. If language is taught through rules and grammar, it becomes tedious and boring task for the learners. The best road to language proficiency lies in its literature” (Adhikari:1). This is absolutely true. But what our students lack language skills and they have already taken literary courses how can we solve the problem? This is what the paper is going to show.

2. Challenges of teaching Fiction: language—reading and writing

The first step to be taken when teaching literature as a separate course or fiction in particular (the short story), course instructor should start with the basics. In all of the classes in which I have taught, I ask some essential questions as those mentioned above. The second step is to make sure that students know how to answer these questions using good English. To my surprise, many students still do not know how to answer these questions. It is a very embarrassing situation and a very problematic one. Students should have consulted their advisor about courses they take. This facilitates our job as course instructors. Otherwise, it is a big problem needing a quick remedy. Basically, the method of asking questions and directing them to students reveal many issues. First, if a student does not know how to answer ‘what is literature?’, believe me instructors of such a course, students from now on will be more responsible for their future prospects, whether to continue with the course or drop and take it again whenever they are able to fulfill course requirements. Another remedy for students who lack interest in the course is to give some good benefits of fiction which can improve student’s academic performance. Given that students will be motivated well enough.

4. The importance of Teaching and Reading Fiction for Both Students and Teachers

Research has always proved that teaching fiction is not an easy job to handle as most people think, especially to students at school or college”. The most important thing to consider in teaching fiction to young adults is the selection of the "right" book. This I have done since college syllabus names it. Now comes the teaching process, which is the heart of education, but here we are focusing on fiction

whose importance reflects the experience of the instructor and students' ability to follow the instructor. "The teaching of fiction to young adults is not an easy thing. We must pay attention to the students' interests, backgrounds, and their perception of environments. My own college students (prospective secondary school English teachers) were frequently too anxious to rely on recollections of their own junior high School Years without taking the time to look at some of the new material available. As a result, I felt this study, would indicate choices which would vary with the passage of time and the situation in which each individual teacher found himself" (Donelson:18). So far, we have been discussing teaching fiction to students. I think it is essential as well for instructors of fiction to read as much of fiction as possible. It will be a learning experience on both sides. Russell mentions ten methods for teachers to improve teaching fiction: (1) "Reading fiction improves your ability to empathize. The entire experience of reading fiction puts you, the reader, into someone else's shoes. Reading fiction gets you emotionally invested in the world the character inhabits. It also exercises a teacher's ability to empathize and have more success seeing the world from a student's perspective." This is a good advice to follow since we ask our students to read. Why do not we ask ourselves to do the same thing. Teachers should be good models for their students. Then Russell mentions another golden advice to the teachers of fiction (2) "Reading improves your pro-social behavior. Fictional stories are filled with great role models, and their actions influence and stick with us. Not only does this inspire you to do more helpful and kind things for your students and peers, it also gives you a library of positive role models and examples to share with your class." I have learned a rule of thumb while I was in America, studying methodology of teaching language skills, which states that everything you read can change you. Russell argues: "Reading fiction abolishes the mind and gears it toward positive thinking, and the person who reads more may find fictional characters that represent him or her in so many traits: kind, helpful, sensitive, creative, ambitious." These traits are triggers for positive outlooks towards life, students, colleagues, family, etc. Next, she stresses another benefit of reading. (3) "Reading hones your social skills. This skill can then be used in real-life social situations, like during parent-teacher conferences or when deciphering classroom dynamics." Another benefit of reading fiction which teachers should have is that (4) "Reading enhances Theory of Mind ability; a crucial social skill is the ability to interpret one's own mental state and that of another and understand that each person has their own unique motives and perspectives. Fictional stories give readers a deep look into others' thoughts and motives, strengthening Theory of Mind ability every step of the way. Having a greater ability to understand your students' perspectives and what motivates them gives you greater insight on the most effective way to reach and teach them." The fifth benefit which Russell finds essential is (5) "Reading grows your vocabulary". To support her argument, she cites a study: "That fiction reading would increase vocabulary size more than just non-fiction was one of our hypotheses—it makes sense, after all, considering that fiction tends to use a greater variety of words than non-fiction does. However, we hadn't expected its effect to be this prominent." She concludes her argument of the importance of reading fiction: "By growing your own vocabulary, your students will also be learning a wider range of words. Way to be an example! "I find the next point sums up the rest of others simply because it focuses on two important skills needed for both college students and teachers, such as "problem solving and creative-thinking skills." The rest are almost related to the mind: "meditation-like break" and thus reading fiction "helps you adapt to change and be open to

new ideas.” The last two are based on personal attitudes such as reading fiction “helps you sleep better, and Fiction readers tend to be happier” (Russell 2020 weareteachers.com).

5. Getting in the World of the Book *The American Short Story: Carrying out the Syllabus*

So far, I have been discussing challenges, remedies, importance of teaching fiction, now I will focus on the book I teach: content, teaching weeks and assessment methods. Below are the requirements as set by Taibah University/ Department of Languages and Translation for teaching short story course. First, it demands the purpose of the course. As in most Departments of English, the teaching plan starts with course specification such as the institution offering the course, course title, credit hours, academic level, prerequisite and objectives like: “What is the main purpose for this course? Upon the completion of this course, students will be able to: (1) Identify the historical, technical, stylistic and thematic aspects of the short story. (2) Outline the different and successive phases in the development of the short story. (3) Write topics on short stories. Another requirement states course description: “This course introduces students to the short story in literature. It starts with an introduction to the short story; its emergence, development and characteristics. Then it focuses on representative English short story writers by studying a short story written by each representative writer. The selected texts exemplify the different traditions and schools of short story writing in English” (Taibah university 2017:346- 355). Finally, the topics are to be covered during the fifteenth week of instruction as the following:

List of Topics	Week No.	Contact Hours
Introduction to the short story: its emergence, development and characteristics	1	2
Edgar Allan Poe: “The Purloined Letter or “The tell-tale heart”	2	2
Nathaniel Hawthorne’s “The Ambitious Guest” or “The Birthmark”	3	2
Virginia Woolf’s “A Haunted House”	4	2
James Joyce: “Araby” or “A Little Cloud”	5	2
Katherine Mansfield: “The Garden Party” or Bliss” (continued)	6	2
Katherine Mansfield: “The Garden Party” or Bliss” (continued)	7	2
1 st midterm exam	8	2
Ernest Hemingway: “Hills Like White Elephants” or Cat in the Rain	9	2
Ernest Hemingway: “Hills Like White Elephants” or Cat in the Rain” (continued”	10	2
Alice Munro: “Boys and Girls” or “Prue”	11	2
Alice Munro: “Boys and Girls” or “Prue” (continued)	12	2
2 nd midterm exam	13	2
Alice Walker: “Everyday use”	14	2
Alice Walker: “Everyday use”	15	2

Readers of my paper, I would like you if you pay a close attention at this delivery plan for fifteen teaching weeks above mentioned and my delivery plan below. See if you wish the changes I have made and for what reasons? The delivery plan is not to be taken for granted. There are a host of reasons why course instructors should make amendments to original plan set by the school or institution. Your experiences

of teaching, the level of students, and the book you have to teach from are good reasons for making necessary changes. I will just demonstrate the first seven weeks an example of my teaching plan. Have you have you noticed the changes?

List of Topics	Week No.	Contact Hours
General introduction to the course: what is literature and its major genres, elements of short story and reference book: <i>The Cambridge Introduction to the American Short Story</i> ; it comprises 23 chapters and the number of stories to read during the course are such as “The Purloined Letter,” “The Ambitious Guest,” “Bliss,” “Hills Like White Elephants,” “Boys and Girls,” and “Everyday use”. The course “traces the genre from its beginning in the early nineteenth century with Irving, [Austin], Hawthorne and Poe via Fitzgerald, Hemmingway and Faulkner to Flannery O’Conner and Raymond Carver” (Scofield 2006: I).	1	2
Chapter 1: Introduction to the American Short Story: Development of the genre to cover the early beginning of the 19th century (1820s -1830s and the last quarter of the 20 th century, sources (European: Boccaccio’s <i>Decameron</i> , Chaucer’s <i>Canterbury Tales</i> , and Middle Eastern: the <i>Thousand and One Nights</i> , local predecessors: Irving’s <i>The Sketch-Book of Geoffrey, Gent</i> : “Rip Van Winkle,” and “The Legend of Sleepy Hollow and Native American origins: “Bear and Rabbit” and the African American), major authors, and their contribution to the genre and major works and, definition of the genre , elements of short story and its major characteristics: the idea as a hero, democracy of form, lightness and mobility and others	2	2
Chapter 2: Early writers of American short stories in the 19th century and their major works: The Short Story as Ironic Myth in Washington Irving’s <i>The Sketch-Book of Geoffrey Crayon, Gent</i> (1819-20): “Rip Van Winkle (1819), and William Austin’s “Peter Rug, the Missing Man” (1824). Romance-parable, grotesque	3	2
Chapter 3: Nathaniel Hawthorne: the “idea as a hero” in <i>The Scarlet Letter</i> ; his first published short story “The Hollow of Three Hills (1830) appeared in the Salem Gazette; his first book collections of the stories were “Twice-Told Tales (1837 and Second Series (1842): tales of puritan history (the scarlet letter), tales of sin and guilt as in “Young Goodman Brown” and art and science as in “The Birthmark”.	4	2
Chapter 4: Edgar Allan Poe: Poe and the aesthetics of the short story, his review of Hawthorne’s <i>Twice – Told Tales</i> (1842) elaborates his idea of the aesthetics of the short story: “unity of effect and impression” but the value of unity has been challenged by modernist and post-modernist aesthetics in general; it was ignored by some writers in the 20 th century. His other major work, his essay “The Philosophy of composition “he wrote about the deaths of beautiful women:	5	2

stories representing this trend are “Morella” (1835), “Legeia” (1838). Thus D.H. Lawrence saw Poe as a writer of “the will”: the will to experience extreme spiritual love . . . against the whole of the limitation of nature; the will to force the experience even to the point of self-destruction and he found the clue to him in the epigraph to “Legeia.” So, Poe can be seen as a writer who, in his narrators, pushes the “will” to experience the most extreme states –deep crimes, madness, the experience of death itself—and wills his own imagination to the limits of these experiences. And In “Ligeia” he records the willful assertion of Ligeia herself against death. . .

“The Imp of Perverse” (Short story by Edger Allan Poe) discusses the narrator’s self-destructive impulse, which causes people to commit acts against their self-interest. This aspect can be traced in many of Poe’s characters such as C. Auguste Dupin who exhibits reason and deep analysis.

Detection and Ratiocination (reasoning): (detective stories): “The Murders in the Rue Morgue” (1841), “The Gold – Bug” (1843), “The Mystery of Marie Roget” (1842-3), and “The Purloined Letter[1845], his best detective story; the plot and analysis of this story you can find on pp 39-40).

Introduction to such stories: “Poe was an inventor, responsible for the science fiction story, the modern horror story (it is Poe who adds the interiorized, psychological ingredient missing – with the exception of James Hogg – from most of the Gothic tradition) and not least the modern detective story. Arthur Conan Doyle, creator of the world’s famous detective Sherlock Holmes, was generous in his acknowledgments to Poe, and Holmes borrows many characteristics from Poe’s master detective, C. Auguste Dupin: the preternatural powers of observation, and even the essential prop of his inspired reveries, the violin” (p. 37).

Science (scientific romance: science fiction), Horror and Comedy: Poe’s short stories horror of various kinds, revenge, fantastic farce, hoax, criminal detection, philosophical fantasy, satire and comedy.

Science fiction stories are “The facts in the Case of M. Valdemar (1845), “The Balloon - Hoax (1844)

And the satiric (satirical sketch), satirical humor “Mellonta Tauta” (1849)

His essays are an example of it is his story “Premature Burial”

Poe’s major characteristics: “but the element of satirical element is more characteristic of Poe than is often thought, and we find it in unexpected in places such as “How to write a Blackwood Article.” “Even in his most horrific stories the extremity of the fantasy often teeters on the edge of absurdity,” which “must be deliberate.” An example of this “The Cask of Amontillado in which we find Poe’s notorious style – full of the most outrageous mannerism, exaggeration and

<p>melodrama – is throughout his work the source of irony. Horror, revenge, murder, cruelty is all treated with this intense mannerism.</p> <p>Whatever the bearing of his art, it is undoubtedly the case that the short story was the perfect form for it: intense, unified in effect, enabling an idiosyncratic narrative voice, holding its reader in the grip of a single sitting, and building, at its most characteristic, to climatic closures” (p 42).</p>		
<p>Chapter 5: Henry Melville</p> <p>As a writer he is best known for his epic novel <i>Moby Dick</i> (1851). The story of the heroic and obsessed Captain Ahab’s search for the great white whale.</p> <p>He wrote the essay “Hawthorne and his Mosses,” a review of Hawthorne’s collection of tales, <i>Mosses from an Old Manse</i>.</p> <p>He wrote fourteen stories and sketches, six of which he collected in <i>The Piazza</i> (1856): “Bartleby,” “The Encantadas, or Enchanted Isles,” “The Lightning – Rod Man,” “The Bell – Tower,” “Bento Cereno” and “The Piazza.”</p> <p>“Bartleby, the Scrivener: A Story of Wall Street” was probably the first to be written. This parable of human isolation has been variously interpreted. It has been seen as a commentary on the dehumanizing effects of bureaucracy and capitalism. Bartleby is a scrivener or copyist – that is, a kind of writer – and the story can be read as a parable of a writer’s quiet rebellion against his employers, his publishers and readers who expect him to follow conventional modes (Melville’s own experience of the reception of <i>Moby Dick</i> is relevant here). One may ask, Is this a story of romantic rebellion or one of psychological withdrawal? The story seems to be a kind of the mystery of human isolation. For the modern reader, Bartleby has a kinship with Kafka’s K. in <i>Metamorphosis</i>. “Bartleby” is one of the greatest short stories in English, and one of the greatest short stories in any language.</p> <p>The pieces of the 1850s constitute a remarkable and coherent portion of Melville’s oeuvre, and “Bartleby” is among his finest achievements. While he will always be remembered by the epic sprawl of his masterpiece and most ambitious work, <i>Moby Dick</i>, these stories have an art and unified force of lasting, capturing the essence of the vision in a finished and concentrated form.</p> <p>“The Ambitious Quest” by Nathaniel Hawthorne: Discussion of basic elements of short story and comprehension questions on the story to be answered by students in class</p> <p>Revision of the first four chapters including five for the coming first midterm</p>	6	2
<p>First midterm: the first five chapters and the two stories: “The Purloined Letter” and “The Ambitious Guest.”</p> <p>Preparation for Chapter six: New Territories: Bret Hart and Mark Twain</p>	7	5

Conclusion:

Teaching fiction is a demanding job for both instructors and students. Not acquiring the requirements of short story such as its meaning, basic elements, and its relation to our daily life are the corner stone in teacher's and student's academic and social life. The challenges of teaching fiction are many but the experience and patience of instructors will make such challenges as easy to tackle as any problem we encounter in our real –life situation. Remember to modify your teaching plan and your strategies of teaching fiction in each course you teach because each time you find new challenges to tackle and new students with lower level or higher level of learning. Consequently, this paper tries to present a tentative delivery plan of teaching fiction, not to be taken for granted since we live in a flux of change. The new challenges demand you to change the way you teach. By doing so, your influence on your students will be surprising.

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