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Alyson Morris and Tim Kelly

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Creative Assessment

Writing Stories as Coursework across the Disciplines

Alyson Morris and Tim Kelly



Alyson Morris and Tim Kelly are Senior Lecturers in English and Creative Writing in the Department of English and Languages at Coventry University. Working with members of staff in the Law School, the Department of Geography Environment and Disaster Management, the Department of International Studies and Social Science, and the Faculty of Health and Life Sciences, they have successfully introduced storytelling as a mode of assessment for modules on Human Rights and Civil Liberties; International Comparative Project (Social Work); Law, Ethics and Policy; Comparative Research in



Disaster Management; Management and Team Working in a Large Organization; A History of International Organized Crime; and Introduction to Nursing and its Fields of Practice

The panel on “Creative Assessment Across the Disciplines” at the NAWA Conference, November 2014, consisted of Alyson Morris and Tim Kelly (English and Creative Writing), Dr Carol Chamley, Fazilah Twining and Lesley Dowding (Health and Life Sciences) and Dr Steve Foster (Law School).

As the traditional modes of student writing are gradually giving way to new digital and multimedia alternatives, so the academic essay is being challenged by creative alternatives. The debate at NAWA examined

the experiments in *storytelling as coursework* being conducted across and beyond the Faculty in Higher Education, and offered some insights into the merits of creative assessment.

At Coventry University, a number of departments are adopting short stories as a means of assessing knowledge and understanding. Some of the subject areas deal with challenging concepts, and lecturers have been looking for new ways to stimulate a greater sophistication of thinking, a deeper interest in research and a higher level of student enthusiasm for, and engagement with, coursework topics than has been generated by the traditional form of *writing for assessment*: the essay. Two senior lecturers in English and Creative Writing (the authors) have been promoting creative assessments across the University with unexpected successes and unforeseen outcomes that warrant debate.

In the UK higher education (HE) context, storytelling is only beginning to be recognized as a viable mode of assessment. Studies based upon *storytelling as a learning tool*, have provided a foundation for our “transformative” research project. McKillop (2005) found that students were, “encouraged to explore their world, to learn by doing, to look at things in different ways, to discuss their world view with others, and as a result, to continually transform their understanding of the world.” Moon and Fowler (2007) asserted that students experienced “a holistic or picture memory which is more effective than that of isolated facts.”

The NAWA panel discussed ways of introducing story writing into university departments as alternatives to essays, reports, case-studies and other traditional modes

of student writing. The discussion expanded upon research conducted in 2010 by Alyson Morris and Steve Foster, which was later published in an article for *Writing in Education*, No. 53. During the initial short story trials with Law students, they admitted gaining more knowledge about their subject area through writing fiction.

Given the centrality of narrative in the human experience, we can begin to appreciate the power of stories in teaching and learning. (Rossiter 2002)

Creative Writing can be a key contributor to learning difficult concepts in higher education. Using it as a learning aid is not a new concept: American and Australian universities have adopted it, but European and British universities have been slower to respond. However, when Alyson Morris approached Steve Foster in 2010, he accepted a proposal to trial short fiction with his Level 3 Human Rights students. One interesting outcome of the trial was that students who chose to write a short story displayed a more in-depth knowledge of the law than students who chose to write a case study. And the students choosing to be assessed by a short story also received higher grades than those writing case studies. Currently (as of 2015), 80% of Human Rights students opt for the short story route to demonstrate their understanding of their subject. Steve Foster said:

As part of the assessment [for] the module "Human Rights and Civil Liberties", I gave the students an option, in lieu of writing a formal legal case note, to write a short story based on any human rights case that they had read about on the course or in the news. The story needed to be based around that case and, initially, had to include some explanation of the legal issues raised in the dispute; subsequently the story did not have to include any reference to the legal issues, and the legal commentary was included separately – this ensured that the students concentrated on the storyline. The story could be written from the perspective of anyone involved or affected by the case. Over the years a number of students chose to submit a short story. The stories have covered euthanasia, privacy and press freedom, terrorism and human rights, peaceful protest and the right to life.

As module leader I made a number of pleasing observations. First, the average mark awarded for the stories was higher than for the formal assessment; and significantly higher than

for previous cohorts on this module. Secondly, the students displayed tremendous enthusiasm in preparing and writing their pieces, taking every opportunity for feedback and corrections before submission. Thirdly, most students showed remarkable imagination in constructing the stories and in developing characters: skills which had not necessarily been evident in their previous work and in their approach to the subject or their classroom contribution. Fourthly, they were able to express themselves much more clearly and were more confident in this medium in comparison to their previous work and the students' efforts in the case notes. Finally, the students appeared to have developed a much deeper understanding and appreciation of their chosen case than we have come to expect from law students in general; our general experience is that students do not like reading cases and find difficulty in identifying and explaining their significance. It appeared that "taking control" of the case for their own purposes led to a much greater appreciation of the legal and human issues in the case. The further opportunity to publish their work in a special annual law journal published at Coventry University has caused a good deal of excitement among those who choose this assessment option.

Maria Maynard, LLB Law third year student said:

I have chosen to take this option twice [now an option for Level 1 and Level 3 Law students] because I have always loved writing stories and being creative with my imagination. The first time I did the short story I used my own personal experiences with my mother who is mentally ill to write about a case based on mental health. I did shed a few tears whilst writing the story and I felt like I was releasing a lot of my own emotions, which was quite therapeutic. Steve published my story in the Coventry Law Journal, which I was very proud of and I did not hesitate to take the short story option the second time when I decided to be a little more adventurous. I chose a case based on human trafficking and tried to give the reader a sense of how desperate the main character's life had been from a young age and through to her twenties. Obviously this part of life is not nice and so I reflected this with swearing, violence, rape, weapons and kidnap. It gave me a chance to really study the case and cases surrounding the issues relevant to my studies, which also made me appreciate areas in life and law that I may never have explored. It is definitely more interesting than the other coursework.

In 2012, having heard about the successes with the Law School, Alyson Morris and Tim Kelly were approached by the Faculty of Nursing and Health Studies, who

wished to adopt the assessment method for their Level 1 module, *Nursing and its Fields of Practice*, and more recently, lecturers in Disaster Management and in Organized Crime joined the project.

Carol Chamley and Fazilah Twining joined the panel at NAWE to discuss their experiences of *storytelling as assessment*. Their nursing students wrote stories on topics such as safeguarding children and vulnerable adults, miscarriage, advocacy, drug abuse, mental capacity, and consent and domestic violence. Carol Chamley said she is now, “embracing this method and interested in exploring the notion that students acquire more knowledge... and sustain it, through creative writing assessment.” She went on to comment:

Creative methodologies authenticate and embed knowledge enabling students to critically explore the concepts and issues of nursing by creating characters in realistic situations... The piloting of the short story for assessment purposes across the nursing fields of practice (Adult, Mental Health, Children and Young People and Learning Disability Nursing) involves exploring creative writing as an assessment tool, as opposed to traditional forms of assessment such as essays, in order to assess professional knowledge gained by students in their undergraduate education.

Carol Chamley further analyzed the benefits of creative writing in the training of nurses:

Creative writing has been linked to the development of problem-solving skills, decision making, intuition, dealing with novel situations and handling uncertainty, whilst building knowledge, intellectual abilities and reflective practitioners. There are many definitions of creativity, but what appears to emerge are ideals of values and outcomes. Schwartz and Abbot (2006) stated that “The nurse benefits from storytelling by deriving information from the story that may not have been collected from a basic health history and physical assessment.” With the implementation of Standards for Pre-registration Nursing Education (NMC 2010), creative learning and writing would seem important in developing future self-regulated reflective critical thinkers, who are fit for purpose.

Whilst broadly positive, Carol Chamley was sensitive to the dangers of introducing creative writing assessment into her discipline. She sums up these as follows:

Creative writing as a vehicle for assessment in subjects other than the study of the craft may be burdensome for students studying other subjects. Further, there are risks in ethical and moral depictions of events explored “creatively” in mental health. However, earning trust and re-gaining confidence in health care delivery is critical for the public, and can be mediated through the unique blend of compassionate values-based care, technical competence and service orientation steered by ethical commitment, social accountability, knowledgeable and skilled practitioners, which forms the essence of professional work, and developing this unique blend requires substantial personal commitment, education and investment by society and institutions. The Francis Report (2013) is a watershed for care in the 21st century, and this, coupled with the New Standards for Pre-registration (NMC 2010) and the Willis Report (2012), provide the rationale to incorporate new and novel ways of assessing student nurses.

Finally, Carol Chamley stated:

Within health care delivery practitioners listen to patients/service-users’ stories and appreciate how these contribute to the healthcare journey; this demonstrates that storytelling appears to be a natural approach for nursing education. In October 2013, the module “Introduction to Nursing and its Fields of Practice” introduced the short story as a piece of coursework in place of a typical essay assignment. The assessment is based upon students’ perceptions of nursing applied to their field of practice. Students were asked to work from the five key concepts of the short story: character, setting, plot, conflict (situation), theme (relating to field of practice). These 300 assignments can be used to explore knowledge gained and held within the memory, and its transformative skills as opposed to essay writing.

As a follow up to the use of short stories for assessment purposes, Carol Chamley intends to interview students and measure performance against those using an essay-based approach.

Last year, the External Examiner for Nursing wrote favourably of the creative assessments for the students:

The quality of the students’ work was excellent and the team should be commended on their achievements. The combination of creative writing and the introduction to nursing has worked well. It is better than a straightforward reflective essay.

This year the External Examiner was delighted to hear of the presentation at NAWA, and further commended the nursing staff for their excellent module, stating that the scripts were excellent overall.

Fazilah Twining, whose field is Mental Health Nursing, has also made a number of comments about the use of the short story for assessment purposes. To begin with she describes the procedure:

Creative writing is used to assess our first year nursing students. The students write a short story, which is based upon their perceptions of nursing. Through writing the story, the students are expected to demonstrate their understanding of key concepts in nursing such as values, professionalism and the role of the nurse.

She goes on to outline some of the difficulties:

Two cohorts of Mental Health Nursing students have now completed this assessment. Each cohort expressed similar anxieties about creative writing as a piece of assessed coursework; for example, very few students in the group had previous experience of creative writing. The students were concerned about how they could demonstrate the module learning outcomes in their short stories. Some students struggled to understand the purpose of creative writing as a form of assessment. Tutorial support and regular reassurance was necessary to manage student expectations.

It is interesting to note that the anxieties were not simply confined to the students; the academics involved also had related concerns:

At first it was hard to understand how our standard marking criteria fitted with the creative writing assessment. The marking criteria are focused on the student's ability to critically analyze the topic. We were wondering if this needs to be tweaked for future assessments. I then realized that the conflict between the characters demonstrated the critical analysis.

Finally, Fazilah Twining offers the following perceptions:

It has been clear from reading the stories that those students who have read widely around the subject have written the better stories. Those who have read key module material and current healthcare policy have been awarded the higher marks.

It has been very clear from their stories that they have understood the significant issues about values in nursing and professional conduct. Most of the stories have adopted a good nurse versus bad nurse approach to illustrate the student's understanding of professional behaviour and compassionate care. The stories have also demonstrated a student's ability to problem-solve as they have written about dilemmas in practice and different solutions have been explored. The stories have covered themes such as professionalism, dementia, schizophrenia and medication management. Creative writing has also enabled students to research topics that are broader than the module content. Topics such as the symptoms of illness and recommended treatments are taught later in the course however, such research has been necessary to accurately develop the characters and the plot. The module team will continue to use creative writing as the form of assessment as it continues to be a positive experience.

Panel member, Lesley Dowding, teaches an employability module named "Management and Team-Working in a Large Organization". She adopted the short story approach with her students, who were required to demonstrate the role of managers and self-management, to present a substantive account of the principles of management, and show comprehension of a range of principles of teamwork. Lesley Dowding said:

We had a brilliant set of scripts to mark and we can see that the students have thought in greater depth about team-working. Overall we are most impressed with the rising quality of the understanding of the students. My fellow lecturer was extremely sceptical about this, but now she is totally sold. I can't imagine going back to the older way of assessment now.

The reference to the "brilliant set of scripts", (hinting at a perhaps uncommon enthusiasm for the more often than not onerous task of marking) brings attention to one of the positive effects of the project for the academics involved. Fazilah Twining commented:

From my experience I have really enjoyed the marking (marking is something which I don't usually enjoy). Some of the stories have been really innovative and interesting to read... From talking to the other lecturers we have all had similar experiences.

After discussions with the various academics who have taken part in this project, we would suggest that

storytelling enhances a learner's ability to evaluate key issues, seek solutions (and alternatives to current practice) and to solve problems. Students are also able to gain a better understanding of their subjects through creating characters, placing them in problematic situations and working through dilemmas imaginatively. Also, by taking three critical thinking aspects *Evaluation, Divergence* and *Problem solving* (transferable skills and key components of employability), the project demonstrates how creating fiction enhances learning competence.

In order to help students to cross threshold concepts it is necessary to devise student-centred activities that allow them to engage... in individual reflection on the troublesome knowledge encountered. (Orsini-Jones 2008: 220)

Creative writing, along with the concomitant reflective commentary, enables students to do exactly that.

We actively sought feedback from students across the disciplines who had taken part in the project. One of the participants, adult nurse, Jade Davis Walker, said:

I absolutely loved writing my story as I've always enjoyed creative writing. It gave me an opportunity to express my views whilst being creative. I thought of a storyline instantly when I received our assignment and couldn't wait to get it all down on paper. Although no assignment is much fun to do, I thoroughly enjoyed writing it and loved my finished piece.

Disaster Management student, Anna Tupling, commented:

I must say I really enjoyed writing the short story, I found it fun and a nice change. I am studying "Disaster, Reconstruction and Development" and for example it will help me if I chose to work in an NGO; stories are a good way to get important messages through to young children, so I appreciated the task.

Mental Health Nursing student, Leanna Bye, emphasized the impact upon research:

Writing my short story certainly helped me to increase my understanding of my subject area of Mental Health Nursing because whilst researching I was able to improve my knowledge and awareness of the legal and ethical side to Mental Health. I also learnt more about the subject through

Service Users' perspectives by reading up on various accounts on what it was like to live with a serious mental illness. I enjoyed completing my coursework, although realized that it was a challenging task.

We also sought feedback from our own students on the English and Creative Writing course to comment on writing fiction, as opposed to writing an essay. They stated that it:

requires people to think in a different manner than they are used to for the more traditional academic subjects; and

involves thinking outside the box and stretching the mind beyond simply processing facts.

To date, we can sum up by asserting that the use of creative assessment has revealed storytelling as a powerful and popular medium, which has had positive effects on motivation, commitment, engagement and literacy. It is our intention to continue encouraging and exploring the use of creative assessment in the future and to seek funding to expand the depth and breadth of our research in this area.

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Alyson Morris is Course Director for BA English and Creative Writing. She writes poetry and short stories, and has published materials for education and marketing. Alyson recently published an anthology of poetry, a short story for *Cutalongstory*, and publishes *Coventry Words*, a yearly creative writing magazine for students. She has an MA in Creative Writing.

Tim Kelly is Associate Head of the Department of English and Languages, and Senior Lecturer in English and Creative Writing. He writes poetry, fiction and screenplays, and is the director of a number of award-winning short films. He recently published his short story, "The Girlfriend", and is currently working on his first novel.

Dr Steve Foster is a Principal Lecturer in the Law School. He specializes in human rights law, prisoners' rights, constitutional law and academic legal writing and has published widely in various journals in those fields. He is the author of *Human Rights and Civil Liberties* (Longman 2011, 3rd edition) and is the co-author of *Unlocking Constitutional and Administrative Law* (Hodder 2010, 2nd edition) He has also written a bestselling text on academic writing: *How to Write Better Law Essays* (Longman 2009, 2nd ed).

Dr Carol Chamley is Senior Lecturer in Children's and Young People's Nursing and Nurse Researcher (Post-doctoral) in the Centre for Children and Families Applied Research. Carol's research interests are in reflective practice as a tool for learning, troublesome knowledge, metacognition and pedagogical approaches to support students' learning in theory and practice.

Fazilah Twining is Senior Lecturer in Mental Health Nursing. She is currently studying at PhD level to explore how spirituality is understood by people with mental health problems. Fazilah teaches across the mental health pre-registration curriculum. She was recently involved in working with the module team to introduce creative writing as a new form of assessment for first year nursing students.

Lesley Dowding is a part-time lecturer in the Health and Life Sciences Faculty. She has written a book related to Management, and is currently working on the 3rd edition of her *Leadership in Healthcare* book. Lesley used creative writing as method of assessment for the first time in 2014 in her team-working module, which is offered to all students across Coventry University.