LESS IS
MORE

TEACHING LITERATURE WITH SHORT TEXTS — GRADES 6–12

KIMBERLY HILL CAMPBELL

Hawker Brownlow
EDUCATION

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Foreword

Kimberly Campbell is a thoughtful, intentional teacher, and the case she makes for short texts in *Less Is More* is compelling. With insight and example she walks us through her classroom, introduces us to her students, and shows how short texts can transform the indifferent into engaged readers and writers.

I wish I had known Kimberly Campbell when I was first teaching high school. Back then, I was confronted with numerous students who were resolute nonreaders both in and outside of school. Some of this was due to skill issues, and some of it was due to indifference—if not resistance—to what was occurring in our classroom. So when I assigned extensive reading for the next day, it was almost guaranteed that virtually no one in the class would complete—or probably even attempt—the work. I quickly found that positive reinforcement was not a powerful inducement for these students, and the threat of failing grades was similarly ineffective; the novel's chapters and the long essays remained either partially or completely unread, and the subsequent classes limped along.

I was a conscientious if not particularly skillful beginning teacher, and I worried about my classroom. It was painfully obvious to me that for both my students and myself, teaching and learning were not occurring. I concluded that there was no way to transform the situation directly, so I moved around it. Rather than continue to fight with my students and lose the battle almost every day, I decided to regroup and began using short texts that we could all experience at the same time.

In class, together, students and I would read silently or, more frequently, read aloud, and short stories, poems, and brief essays, both fiction and nonfiction, became our staples. The benefits were huge and virtually immediate: completing the reading was inescapable, and, when we read aloud, students could not only see the text but hear it read with real interpretive intonation, greatly enhancing comprehension. The activity immediately following the reading activity—discussion or writing—was reinforcing and organic; there was no gap between the reading and the response. Interest improved, grades rose, and student and teacher satisfaction soared.

Kimberly Campbell knows all this and makes the point in *Less Is More* that using shorter texts addresses a number of instructional issues about which most of us conscientious teachers fret. For Campbell, short texts are a "great equalizer" that can serve to address the varying reading abilities of students in our classrooms. In addition, with short texts a teacher can more easily use a variety of genres: the short story, the essay, the memoir, the poem, children's books, and graphic novels. With short texts teachers can directly incorporate reading strategies, use literature circles, and, for challenged readers and English language learners, convert the text to an audio recording and even into a second language translation. Texts can indeed be read aloud or read silently in class, but with shorter pieces, teachers can also be confident that students likely will complete these more manageable reading assignments on their own.

Clearly, I believe in the genius of small things, but this is not to argue that only short texts are acceptable in our classrooms. There is a place for the 5,000-line epic, the five-act play, and the 500-page novel. Some students will want to read *Middlemarch* or *Bleak House* or even *Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix*, and they should. Some teachers will want to incorporate some longer texts into their curriculum, and they should be welcome to do so. Certainly sustained concentration on a long text is a skill that will stand students in good stead long after they leave our classrooms.

But I do not feel that such longer texts should be the absolute center, the sine qua non, of the curriculum. As Kimberly Campbell notes, many of our colleagues face mandated English curriculums that consist entirely of canonical works, novels, long (mostly Shakespearian) plays, and virtually no poetry or short fiction and nonfiction. When students are confronted solely and consistently with texts that are complex and lengthy, there is resistance, a tendency to disengage and to look for shortcuts that may help complete a required assignment but that circumscribe or even totally avoid actual reading. Surely we as teachers do not want to contribute to the epidemic of nonreading that plagues so many English classrooms. Indeed, many students are skillful at doing almost anything with a long, canonical text but actually read it, at least as we expect it to be read. And, thanks to innumerable resources readily available on the Internet, this kind of nonreading can be almost undetectable.

Given a text that is manageable, though, most students are far less tempted to skip the assignment or to cram, skim, or run to the mother of all reading challenges, SparkNotes. Real learning can occur through tackling a shorter piece and examining a text that is, for many students, ultimately more manageable. In addition, exposure to a variety of literary genres—many of which are short texts—can do nothing but enhance a student's interest in lifelong reading. Finally, a classroom literature community is easier to construct and maintain when students are actually reading and thus are legitimately engaged.

Shakespeare instructed us that brevity is the soul of wit; Wordsworth found freedom in the sonnet's scanty plot of ground. For many of our students, exploring the small can also be intensely satisfying. Kimberly Campbell knows this, and *Less Is More* is a practical and smart discussion of how students and their teachers can find pleasure and profit in short pieces of literature that are well written and satisfying to complete. We can ask for no more.

— LEILA CHRISTENBURY

CHAPTER 1

Teaching Literature with Short Texts

Yet a story's very shortness ensures its largeness of accomplishment, its selfhood, and purity.

–LORRIE MOORE

Picture the scene twenty years ago. I am reading aloud Roald Dahl's wonderfully twisted short story "Lamb to the Slaughter" to my junior high students. In the story made famous in an Alfred Hitchcock television program, a woman clubs her husband with a frozen leg of lamb, then covers the crime by roasting the meat as she chats innocently with the police detectives. I read it aloud as the students follow along with their copies, rain streaming down the lone window in the classroom. When I am finished, there is a hushed silence, which erupts thirty seconds later into questions, comments, theories, reactions. Students call out, "Do you think the wife will really get away with it?" "I think the husband deserved it." "Who wrote this story? I love how the cops at the end are eating the murder weapon." "Can we hear the story again so we can listen for clues?" "Cool story—got any more by this guy?" And I did have more. We went on to read "The Way Up to Heaven" by Roald Dahl, which students also admired for its surprising revenge ending. We then explored Shirley Jackson's "The Lottery," a story that haunted students for the remainder of the year. Its misleading lead, which paints a portrait of an idyllic summer day as a community gathers, sets up the shocking ending in a way that intrigued the seventh and eighth graders.

We read many short stories that first year of my teaching career, and every year after. As an English major, I didn't read very many short stories in college. Literature courses I took focused on novels and the occasional poem. As I entered my first classroom as a teacher, in a junior high located on Main Street in a small, rural Oregon town, I pictured myself sitting in a circle, engaged in a lively discussion with my eager young students about whatever novel we were reading. I was shocked to discover that the junior high had no classroom sets of novels for my students to read. Literature was not the focus of the junior high curriculum; the emphasis was on writing, spelling, and grammar. In fact, sentence diagramming was a mandate; students were required to pass sentence-diagramming tests.

While hunting for a teacher's edition of the grammar book so I could learn how to diagram sentences in an effort to support my students, I stumbled across a dusty copy of a short story collection. Hidden inside the tattered green cloth covers were stories—stories that became the glittering gems in an otherwise tedious march through formulaic writing prompts, weekly spelling pre- and post-tests, and the grammar focus of the month.

Short stories provided more than a distraction from the grammar and writing formulas. Students were identifying the elements of short stories: character, setting, plot, and theme. They were discovering literary elements: irony, foreshadowing, and point of view. They were noticing writing craft: a compelling lead, surprise endings, and the use of descriptive language. They were also making text-self connections, identifying with characters, and seeing how the character's decisions were related to their own lives. Short stories were a way into literature for these students. They are a way into literature for most students.

When I moved from teaching at the junior high to teaching at the high school, I brought my passion for short stories with me. Fortunately, the literature anthologies I was required to use, although unwieldy in size and weight, were rich with short stories. I supplemented the anthologies with short stories I had grown to love. Poetry was another form of short text that had served my junior high students well. Again I used the anthology but also used my limited copying budget to provide students with poetry not contained in the anthology. In addition to the anthology reading, novels were a literature focus. And the novels that were required were the same novels I had read in high school: *Great Expectations, To Kill a Mockingbird, Lord of the Flies, Of Mice and Men, The Great Gatsby, The Scarlet Letter.* Each year we also taught at least one play: *Romeo and Juliet, Julius Caesar, Raisin in the Sun, Death of a Salesman, Our Town, Macbeth, Hamlet*.

Although many of these longer works were favorites of mine, I was struck by the difference in how students read and responded to these longer texts. The participation level during discussions of longer texts was significantly less than when we were discussing short texts. When I queried students about the assigned reading in longer texts, they were candid in sharing that they had read the text but could not retain all the details, so they did not feel comfortable talking in class. And some students admitted that they had not done the reading. Students were frank about the sense of frustration they felt as they read; they were overwhelmed by the complexity of the multiple characters, settings, and plot twists. But the more common response to longer texts was an intense dislike for the text—a dislike that grew in intensity the longer we worked with the text.

I empathized with the students' complaints. As an English major I had read many books that I disliked. But I also recognized that despite my dislike for the text, I learned from these authors. And although I did not want my students to be frustrated, I did want them to be pushed as readers so they could develop reading skills that would support reading complex texts. So I clung to the inclusion of longer texts, but I worked to pick books I thought would have greater interest for more students than the traditional texts seemed to have; for example, I traded *Great Expectations* for *A Separate Peace* in my freshman English class. I also paid attention to reading strategies, although I realize now, after reading Cris Tovani's wonderful work *I Read It, but I Don't Get It* (2000), that there was much more I should have done.

But the distinction between who we were as a literature community when we read and discussed short stories and poetry and who we were when we were immersed in reading a novel continued to fascinate me. Students dug deep when they spoke about short stories and poetry. They referred to the text in support of their answers. They spoke about the craft of the writing, noting how figurative language, foreshadowing, irony, and point of view contributed to the literature's effect. Students were engaged in literature appreciation and analysis. And the short texts we read were often complex and required close attention using the reading strategies we were exploring, in particular text-to-self, text-to-text, and text-to-world connections.

I found myself using more and more short texts because their length supports in-class reading—reading that can be supported with reading strategies. And short texts' length supports in-class discussion, often on the same day the short text is read, in development of an appreciation for literature. An emphasis on short texts allowed me to include classic authors as well as multicultural and contemporary works. Rather than reading less with short text, my students were reading more. I also appreciated the fact that reliance on reading supplements such as SparkNotes and online summaries and essays was reduced. I was saddened to discover that there are online essays about short texts, particularly short stories, but these can be avoided if I am creative in my framing of the response to literature (see section entitled "Writing in Response to Literature" in Chapter 2 for more on this).

Beyond Fake Reading

Short texts were also a response to fake reading. I found that in-class reading of short texts allowed me to observe my students as readers. And, if needed, I could intervene, with individuals and with the whole class. For one of my students—I'll call him Fred—reading in class resulted in my discovering that he could not read. It was early fall, and I had just assigned an in-class reading of Nathaniel Hawthorne's short story "The Minister's Black Veil." This is not an easy read, so I had talked with students about focusing their attention on the references to the veil; they were marking these references with sticky notes (see Chapter 3 for more on this story and reading strategy). I circulated as students read, noting how they were using the sticky notes. I noticed Fred shifting in his chair; his eyes moved from the page in the book to the desk of the student next to him. I watched as he picked up his sticky note, looked again at the student sitting next to him, and placed the sticky note in the same place as the other student. He then stared down at the book for several minutes. I asked Fred to stay after class and talk with me. As he sat down in the chair next to my desk, I noted his anxiety. "Fred, thanks so much for staying after class today. I haven't had the opportunity to work with you before, so I wanted to spend a few minutes finding out more about you as a reader. Over the course of the year I ask all of my students to sit down and read with me. So today is your day. I would like you to read the first paragraph of the story we read in class today aloud to me. I know reading aloud is a different reading skill than silent reading, but this is helpful information for me and I really like hearing this story." Fred did not look up from the floor; his eyes had been focused on the green carpet in my classroom since he sat down. I handed him the literature anthology. Silence. I waited. More silence. "Fred, would you prefer to read the first paragraph silently and tell me what you read? We can start there?" Silence. "Fred, tell me how I can help you."

Fred responded, his eyes still focused on the floor, "Mrs. Campbell, the words in this story are really confusing. I . . . " His voice broke as he turned to look at me. "I don't think I know how to read." I thanked Fred for his honesty as my eyes welled up with tears, and I assured him that I would help him learn to read.

I acknowledge that Fred's situation is unique. But Fred, whose first language is English, had attended public school since the first grade. He was then a junior in high school. And Fred could not read. He was a charming, sociable boy who had developed coping skills to cover his lack of literacy skills. Fred's story is just one example of the range of abilities my students brought to literature reading. I worked with students who could read in their native language but not English, students who could not read in their native language or English, and students who were native English speakers but, like Fred, struggled with reading. Asking these students to read a novel that would challenge a reader with excellent reading skills is not why I became a teacher. Short texts were the way for me to address the varying reading abilities in my classroom. I read short texts aloud to the whole class and to small groups. I taught reading strategies that we then applied in class as we read short texts. I formed literature circles that read a variety of short texts with different reading challenges. I arranged to have short texts read on tape and even translated into my students' native languages. Short texts served as the great equalizer.

Meeting the Objectives for Teaching Literature

Please know that this move to the inclusion of—even dominance of—short texts in my literature classroom was slow and at times agonizing for me. I adore reading novels. My bookshelves are heavy with novels. I want my students to discover the joys of immersing themselves in a book, of