THE PLOT SKELETON AS A TEACHING TOOL FOR INTRODUCING PLOT IN FICTION: A REFLECTIVE INQUIRY

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ABSTRACT

Undergraduate creative writing courses are tasked with laying a foundation for students' future writing. Plotting is a complex fiction-writing concept, complicated by writers' and scholars' conflicting views on the subject. For years, I have used author Angela Hunt's (2013) Plot Skeleton to teach plotting. Though the activity is popular and enables students to implement plotting concepts in their stories, reflecting on the module revealed why the Plot Skeleton succeeds. It requires high expectations of students, addresses multiple ways of learning, gives ample opportunities for participation, is considered "fun" by students, facilitates group interaction, and employs a gradual release of responsibility teaching format.

STATEMENT OF THE PURPOSE

Undergraduate creative writing classes give students a comprehensive view of the process writers use to invent fiction and nonfiction works. Concepts used to create literary works prove slippery for the student writer to grasp. Each writer must fully absorb complex foundational structure and shape it to his own purpose. Literary constructs probably cannot be thoroughly explored, even by creative writing majors during their entire undergraduate education. Ideally, mastering literary "skeletons" is a lifelong journey for the writer. But the problem remains—where to start when setting the stage for aspiring writers.

Narrowing the focus to fiction, the instructor should determine the necessary elements and objectives his or her students will need to comprehend before diving into writing their own short stories. According to Charters (2007) in *The Story and Its Writer*, plot, character, setting, point of view, style, and theme are the essential elements of fiction. Teachers must find digestible ways to introduce difficult creative writing concepts such as these so that students can effectively implement them when writing their own tales. To accomplish this feat, professors should strive to instill in their students more than a rudimentary grasp of story building.

Educators quibble over what items should appear on the must-learn list for new fiction writers. However, all would include plotting. Maass (2001) in *Writing the Breakout Novel*, defines plot as, "The organization of a story: its events and their sequence" (p. 133). Kurland (2006) adds, "Continuing action, striving toward a Worthwhile Goal, as the universal plot would have it, is what the story is all about" (para. 17). An age-old debate exists as to whether character development or plot construction garner greater importance in story. Gardner (1984) says, "By our actions we discover what we really believe and, simultaneously, reveal ourselves to others" (p. 46). What Gardner illustrates is that characterization and plot develop side-by-side. This means that the student must master both concepts to establish intriguing action and realistic characters who engage the readers' emotions. However, of the two, plotting is generally the more painstaking concept to teach.

Plotting is a complicated process that some students fail to master in their first creative writing classes. This causes them to be ill-prepared for subsequent steps in their writing pilgrimage—writing a story, script, or play for class or fulfilling dreams of publishing. One of the foundational building blocks is missing; therefore, the students' creativity is fundamentally hampered.

The purpose of this inquiry is to reflect on the use of an innovative tool—the Plot Skeleton—for teaching plot construction in foundational creative writing classes. I needed a teaching method that would enable students to learn how to plot and thereby create successful fiction. The Plot Skeleton achieved this goal. An unexpected benefit was finding a classroom activity that engages students and creates fun in the classroom. This surprising outcome was reflected on after using this teaching tool numerous times. Prior to taking students through the Plot Skelton exercise, I observed that even learners who had a firm grasp of plot did not understand how to build their own plots. So, the hoped-for outcome of students learning how to construct plot within their stories was achieved by using the Plot Skeleton.

Because I process most life experiences through journaling, it makes sense to process teaching experiences through writing about them. This reflection follows John Dewey's (1909) belief that, "Observation is exploration, inquiry for the sake of discovering something previously hidden and unknown, this something being needed in order to reach some end, practical or theoretical" (p. 193). To apply this concept to teaching, one must not only observe classroom activities as they take place, but also think deeply about them afterward to reveal why they succeeded or failed. Dewey (1909) states that this intentional reflecting involves

> *forming the connecting links; the statement of a principle, or, in logical phrase, the use of a universal. If we thus formulate the whole situation, the original data are transformed into premises of reasoning; the final belief is a logical or rational conclusion, not a mere de facto termination. (p. 80)*

Thus, as teachers contemplate the teaching episode, they should look for connecting links, principles, or universal truths. This practice enables the instructor to draw logical conclusions from the classroom experience. Once one decides why a teaching tool succeeded, they can intentionally repeat concepts that worked when teaching new skills.

STATEMENT OF PROBLEM

Some students will come to an introductory creative writing or foundational fiction class with prior knowledge of plot. They may have absorbed the concept from exposure to literature or study of writing craft. However, others will meet plot for the first time. Regardless, plotting is essential to all fiction writing and cannot be glossed over. Plotting for fiction, drama, and sometimes memoir is, perhaps, the most complex concept that a student must master in an initial creative writing class. Morley (2007) in *Cambridge Introduction to Creative Writing* calls the writing process chaotic, "a mapless place, a zone for experiments, and for the constant interruption of failures" (p. 95). However, others, including Harper (2013), see more structure in fiction: a character faces an initial problem in capturing a goal. The character then struggles uphill, overcoming roadblocks to his desire until facing a peak of self-defining choice where he must fulfill or sacrifice his quest. He may also discover a truth about himself and the object he longs for. The crisis moment precipitates change or realization. This, in turn, causes transformation, demonstrated by action or image. Terms used to describe this chain of events—plot—are exposition, inciting incident, rising action, climax, and resolution.

Most practitioners of fiction would see some structural elements as essential to plot. However, instructors, especially new teachers like me, find teaching plotting unusually challenging. Myriad viewpoints about plot structure exist, and fiction practitioners use different terminology to describe the correct path to plot. One such viewpoint is the Hero's Journey, which was brought to popularity by author and educator, Campbell (1972), who envisioned plot as a monomyth involving the stages of birth, call to adventure, helper/Amulet, crossing the threshold, tests, helpers, climax/final battle, flight, return, elixir, home. Another theory of plot structure—still popular today—was developed by German playwright and novelist, Freytag, known as Freytag's Triangle or Dramatic Arc. Freytag (1863) saw the pattern in Greek and Shakespearean dramas as exposition, rising action, climax, falling action, and denouement (as translated by MacEwan, 2015). According to Gardner (1984) in *The Art of Fiction*, plot centers around profluence, "a sequence of causally related events, a sequence that can end in only one of two ways: in resolution… or in logical exhaustion" (p. 53). Gardner (1984) says the reader must be "led by successive seemingly inevitable steps… to its relatively stable outcome" (p. 55). In other words, plot involves one event causing the next, which causes

the next, culminating in some type of resolution. Maass (2001) views the character-driven story as the most viable contemporary plot structure. The protagonist is a dynamic character whose desires or needs drive the story's action. This contrasts with an "everyman" who is propelled to action by forces outside himself. Many more perspectives exist on what exactly plot should include. Like the above examples, the ideas and theories sometimes overlap and sometimes diverge. Students will study and test various plotting theories if they pursue creative writing. But a foundational creative writing instructor needs a simplistic and time-efficient vehicle to teach plotting.

I found the sheer volume of plotting information, much less the dueling opinions, overwhelming—first as a writer and later when attempting to create a concise lesson plan. As I developed as a writer, I "practiced" various plotting techniques until arriving at what worked for me. Teaching plotting, however, was thrust on me with no time to learn by trial and error.

PROJECT DESCRIPTION

Shortly after completing an MFA in creative writing, I began teaching university introductory creative writing classes. I had written five novels and two memoirs, but I was insecure about teaching. The one concept I did feel confident about teaching was plotting.

Years earlier, when on book promotion tours to launch my coming-of-age novels, I guest-lectured in university creative writing classes. One of the first host professors asked if I would address plotting for his community college Introduction to Creative Writing students. At this point in my career, I had a bachelor's degree in creative writing and only informal teaching experience. The thought of teaching something as complicated as plotting sent me into near panic.

As a starting point, I thought about my own plotting journey as an author. During the course of my fiction writing career, I had used various planning methods, from seat-of-the-pants writing (no pre-planning) to extensive outlining of each scene prior to writing the book. I tried the Snowflake Method (Ingermanson, 2014), which involves starting with a one-sentence description of a proposed story, expanding the idea to one paragraph, then adding paragraphs to outline each character's story. This is followed by creating a full-page plot synopsis, then a four-page synopsis, and eventually ideas for each scene in the book. I also tried Weisner's (2005) *First Draft in 30 Days* method, which involves an intricate system of charts and worksheets. None of these methods would be as effective when teaching students the basic elements of story; they focused more on the creative process of dreaming up a story.

The final plotting help I employed was the Plot Skeleton, developed by author Hunt (2013). The method requires drawing a stick person and affixing corresponding parts of the body with plot points. The eyes represent the obvious and hidden needs of the character. The smile symbolizes a positive character trait. The neck is the inciting incident. The backbone illustrates the story goal. Elements of conflict become ribs, the final rib the climax. The remaining body parts complete the plot: thigh, someone helps the character; knee, the character learns a lesson; and shin, the character makes a decision. The foot concludes the story with resolution—the character lives happily or unhappily ever after.

The visual aid of a stick person proved an excellent match with my own story-building process. I was able to "see" the plot taking shape, and the activity was not so complex that I became mired in rabbit trails. I began using this streamlined tool frequently for story framing as well as developing subplots. The Plot Skeleton would give students a simple process to use in plotting their own stories, and it would also break down the necessary elements of plot for them.

In the context of book marketing, simply giving students a handout and lecturing on plot construction did not sound like it would cause students to buy books. I needed to make my guest-lecture classroom experience to be as interactive and enjoyable as possible. I hit on the idea of casting the entire class as TV writers. Television writers build plots en masse by sequestering themselves in a room and yelling out ideas. For my first attempt at teaching plot, I would draw a stick person on the board, then prompt the class to come up with story ideas for each part of the plot. Students, hopefully, would throw out many ideas. If a student's idea was not workable, I could redirect tactfully. For example, "An explosion is a great conflict element; it may work well for the climax. Right now, we

need a smaller conflict for the hero to overcome." After students volunteered multiple ideas for an individual plot point, if a consensus were not reached, I could choose the idea that seemed most usable. I would then introduce the next plot element, and this process would continue until the whole plot was formed. Most writers are introverts, so I was not sure if students would participate in the TV-writer activity or if they would enjoy it. However, the activity proved so engaging and effective that the professor had me return to his creative writing classes with the Plot Skeleton for many years. Before becoming a college instructor, I also did the activity with junior high language arts class members, kindergarteners, and many senior citizen community education creative writers. In the dozens of times I led this plot-building activity, students eagerly spouted ideas. Even students who did not contribute verbally gave strong eye contact and appeared to track with the class.

When faced with teaching plot as a new professor in my own university introductory creative writing classes, I knew the Plot Skeleton would teach students the basics of plotting. To bolster the Plot Skeleton TV-writers activity for my college students, I had them pick out plot points from a couple of short stories for homework the day before. This type of analysis proved personally effective while I worked on my Master of Fine Arts (MFA), and I suspected it would do the same for my students. To further cement plot, after the whole-class plot-building activity, I gave students a second opportunity to form a Plot Skeleton in groups of four. This smaller group format solidified the concepts. Students were prepared to develop their own plots. The reserved students became more vocal in the small group setting. Afterward, each group reported back to the class with their plots. If any group failed to produce a feasible plot—for example, omitted conflict—I gave gentle suggestions for improvement.

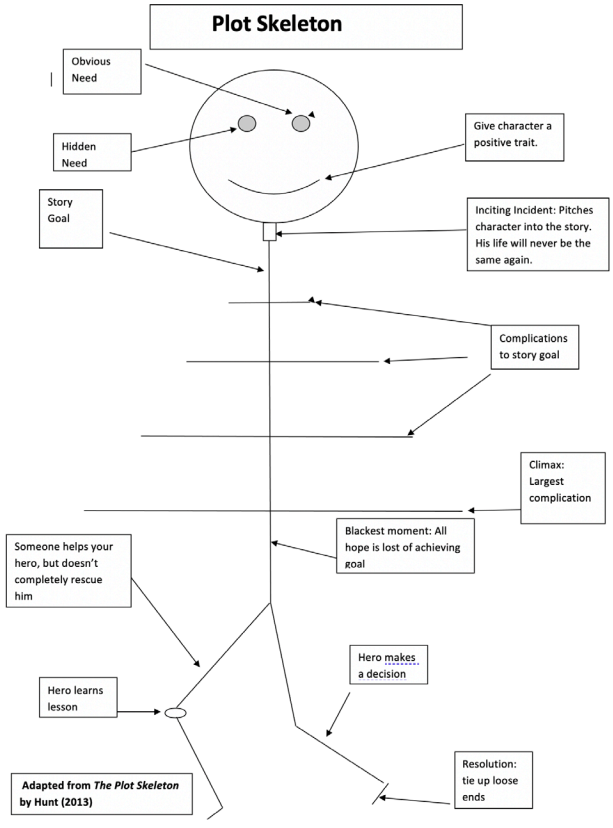

Figure 1. Plot Skeleton

The Plot Skeleton involved a complete stick figure of a body, and it put the student's whole physical body to use. They used their eyes to visualize the plot as a skeleton. They used their brains to generate plot ideas. They argued for their ideas with their voices. They heard the plot come together with their ears. Finally, their emotions engaged as the story reached its climax.

I then turned the students loose to develop their own stories. The Plot Skeleton was productive on multiple levels. It circumvented students shipwrecking their often-beautiful prose with a lack of structure. Almost all my university students "passed the test" of plotting by creating short stories that utilized sound plotting structure. Notably, the students whose stories foundered had been absent the day plotting was covered.

PROPOSED REASONS

Attitude of Respect Toward Students

As I considered why the Plot Skeleton had been so effective, I first thought about my own attitude toward the students. When I started using the Plot Skeleton as a teaching tool, I was not yet a university professor. I viewed the students as fellow writers, intelligent and capable people. Some of the creative writers in the room might write as well or better than I did. Others might develop their skills and later surpass my writing abilities. I expected them to grasp plotting and write brilliant stories. This mindset followed me into the university classroom.

This attitude was modeled in my MFA program where professors, for example, routinely explained why they were asking us (students) to participate in various learning activities. Sometimes the activities, like role-playing, fell outside of my comfort zone. But once the instructor stated that role-playing would energize my writing creativity, I was willing to try it. Professors in my program also projected humility and equality by working alongside students on their own writing projects while we completed our class assignments. One program highlight that exemplified this was a three-minute "Write Into the Room" at the beginning of each residency day. Students and professors sat elbow to elbow around a table and wrote from a writing prompt for the allotted minutes. Anyone who liked what they had produced was invited to read their work aloud. Faculty and students would then comment on the strengths of the writing. Their words affirmed each person's creative gift. As a result of the professors' respectful attitudes toward me, I felt like an intelligent human being, capable of mastering difficult concepts and implementing them with artistic excellence. I determined to adopt their gold standard attitude toward my future students.

I noticed this peer-attitude playing out in a medical setting as well. Once I wrote *English professor* on medical forms, doctors related to me as a peer. First, they usually expressed concern that I would catch them using poor grammar. Then, they explained my health issues in noticeably more depth than in the past. They expected me to comprehend and dialogue with them about their suggested treatment. Their change in attitude made me feel like my I.Q. had suddenly skated into Mensa territory. I lifted my chin and listened to their medical terminology with closer attention than usual and successfully grasped the information. I asked pertinent questions and occasionally suggested a deviation from their recommendations—which they approved.

Conversely, as a TA, I watched one professor answer a student's question as though the student were slow-witted. Having been treated similarly by this professor as an employee and having experienced the accompanying embarrassment and diminished self-esteem, I felt bad for the student. I noted that he stayed away from class for three weeks. Teachers can discourage students by intentionally or unintentionally communicating their low opinion of students' intellect or capabilities. The instructor's negative attitude does not necessarily stop the student from learning. But the teacher's pessimistic view of the student may produce fear or a sense of being overwhelmed in the learner. True, the student may not walk all the way down Discouragement Road to defeat. But the instructor's superior attitude may make the learning process unpleasant. This particular student soldiered on and passed freshman composition.

Respecting and holding high expectations of students does not directly speak to why the Plot Skeleton succeeded. But it likely makes students feel intelligent, capable, and artistic. This, in turn, contributes to a can-do atmosphere in the classroom. If I can instill in my students the positive internal self-image my MFA instructors and medical providers sparked in me, the stage is set for them to excel to their full potential.

Gradual Release of Responsibility

I often use "I-do, we-do, you-do" in lesson planning, but until reflecting, I did not realize how well the Plot Skeleton demonstrated the teaching model. The "I-do" step begins the learning process by the instructor modeling what they expect of students. The "we-do" step enables the teacher to coach the students as they attempt the skill. "You-do" completes the teaching process by transferring responsibility to the student as they practice the skill independently. The TV-writers activity straddles the "I-do" and "we-do" parts of the learning process. This happens when the instructor leads the whole class in creating a plot by consensus. The instructor guides students toward a workable plot by championing some ideas over others. Students discuss the merits of dueling plot ideas until one plot point is agreed upon—accomplishing the "we-do" portion. "You-do" happens when each student pens their own tale. This teaching model, evident in the Plot Skeleton activity, likely facilitates students learning to plot.

Fun

The role-playing as TV writers may have also aided learners in absorbing plot structure. As a high school student, I struggled through Algebra I, barely earning a "C" in the course. However, the following year I landed in Algebra II with Mr. Andrews who peppered his math with copious jokes and smiles. I sailed through the year with an "A" and gained a strong grasp of the concepts. This

experience revealed a link between what students and teachers deem as "fun" and learning. The Plot Skeleton activity feels more like a bunch of friends playing a board game—as students shout out ideas and argue for them—than a college lecture. After completing the Plot Skeleton, participants often commented that the activity had been enjoyable. It seems logical that if students find pleasure in doing something, they will learn the material.

Communicating to All Learning Types

Next, I observed that the Plot Skeleton activity captured visual, verbal, as well as experiential learners. Personally, I am a visual learner and have difficulty remembering lectures or any audial input if I do not take notes. I also believe that the experiential act of writing further cements the facts I hear. The skeleton diagram served as a conduit for visual learners. Verbal learners connected with the out-loud aspect of building a plot together as a class. Experiential learners benefitted by participating in the process of structuring a story.

Ample Opportunities for Students to Engage

I could not help wondering if the abundance of opportunities for students to participate played into the activity's success. More students spoke up than I initially anticipated, perhaps because there are so many blanks to complete. After the more outgoing students warm up the room with their suggestions, there are still plenty of plot points to fill in. This gives shyer students time to gather their courage and jump in midstream. If the class does not embrace a student's first suggestion, there are still more opportunities to contribute. While every student in the room does not speak up, they all have opportunities to choose to participate. Logically, giving students a plethora of chances to share ideas helps them engage and, therefore, learn, but it probably supports the students' absorption of concepts.

Employing Group Process

In both the large group and in groups of four, students use group process to create cooperatively, which facilitates learning. The whole-class and the small groups both utilize members' ideas to construct a story. When broaching group process as a student, I recall a sense of relief that I would have help from classmates in completing a difficult task. I took ownership of the group's "product" that we achieved together and felt a sense of accomplishment upon completion. Yes, group discussion depends on the commitment and attitude of the members, but I have left most group experiences with new knowledge or skills. This makes me believe that the group process promotes learning in the whole-class as well as the four-member plot construction groups.

EVALUATION OF REASONS

Each possible explanation for the success of the Plot Skeleton will be individually examined. To test my opinions, I explore what expert educators and researchers conclude about employing high expectations of students, multiple ways of learning, ample opportunities for student participation, fun, group interaction, and "I-do, we-do, you-do" to reach informed conclusions.

Attitude of Respect Toward Students

Respecting learners as peers generally results in mutual respect in the classroom and sets the stage for learning. Reed College professor Levich (2013) describes how this looks in the classroom:

> *You had a burning problem that you asked students to pursue. And then you talked about it as if everyone in that class were a professional, as though they were your equals…. It was amazing how—if you expected the best from students—how many of them would, in one way or another, fulfill your expectation. (as cited in Freeman, 2013, para. 5)*

Levich's classroom experience mirrors my own. Similarly, Weinstein (2004), in *Reaching Higher: The Power of Expectations in Schooling* concurs, "The evidence seems to suggest overwhelmingly that we have greatly underestimated human ability by holding expectations that are too low for too many children…. The responsibility for helping children reach higher lies with teachers" (p. 297-298). While Weinstein is discussing children rather than young adults, the principle applies to both age groups. The teacher's high expectations of the student cause the learner to stretch to meet those expectations. Fortunately, expecting the best from students came organically to me. My expectation in approaching the Plot Skeleton was that the students would swallow their natural reticence, "play the game" of TV writing, and ultimately learn how to plot. While considering students as equals and holding high expectations may not directly cause them to learn, it establishes a positive learning

environment. My faith in the students urges them to rise to the task at hand and internalize the concepts I teach.

Gradual Release of Responsibility

The "I-do, we-do, you-do" learning model is a viable means of transferring knowledge to students. This gradual release of responsibility learning pattern was developed by researchers Pearson and Gallagher (1983), who found that learning happened cyclically. Acquiring knowledge involves instruction, guided practice, teacher response, and student application. This cycle gradually transfers accountability from the instructor to the learner.

In the Plot Skeleton activity, the "I-do" happens when the instructor guides students to appropriate choices. If students get off track, the teacher steers them back on course. For example, I ensure that the inciting incident truly is the story's initial, major turning point by suggesting students delay pivotal changes until after the character has been established in their "normal" life. The small group plot building exemplifies the "we-do" aspect of learning. Some students can be more familiar or proficient in plotting. They coach their group members by their participation in the group. "You-do" occurs when students write their own stories. The Plot Skeleton successfully completes the gradual release of responsibility cycle.

In an article about training future teachers, Henning-Smith (2018) elaborates on the GRR method,

> *It is not enough to acknowledge the inherent uniqueness in each and every individual, and then continue to design support around a progression of development based on an assumption of universal needs. Do teachers really develop in a linear, or "staged" fashion, improving one skill after the next, always checking off a new box of growth? The answer is "no." (p. 20)*

While the author is discussing a specific type of student, his findings apply in a broader sense to all students, including creative writers. Therefore, we can say that writers develop in a non-linear way, tied to each one's individuality. Henning-Smith (2018) states that,

> *in every action taken, there is a "never-repeatable" action that only the teacher can create. While teachers are in the beginning intersections of their own development, they are creating never repeatable acts that begin to grow their teacher identity and thus foster their individual development. For a program to support each individual candidate, it must act with an obligation to honor that candidate's once-occurrent presence in the present, while simultaneously recognizing that a once-occurrent event is a product of all the events in a person's life. (p. 20)*

Likewise, the Plot Skeleton optimizes each writer's "never-repeatable" actions—producing plot ideas—by teaching them how to plot and maturing their writer-identities and individual artistic development.

Communicating to All Learning Types

Visual, auditory, and experiential learners all take in information differently. Logically, a teacher should address all student types. Weinstein (2004) agrees, saying, "We must create plentiful opportunities to stretch the capacities of children. We must offer multiple methods in varied modalities of instruction and assessment the first time around" (p. 300). Bradford (2011) notes that 65% of learners absorb information by seeing, 30% by hearing, and 5% by doing. If an instructor limits themself to lecture, only 30% of students will grasp the information they are communicating. Finn, novelist and Creative Writing Chair at Chandler-Gilbert Community College, invited me into his Introduction to Creative Writing classes many times to take his students through the Plot Skeleton. Finn observes,

> *The goal of all of my creative writing courses is to teach students to trust their imaginative instincts—especially when they feel like they have little or nothing to share. So, I'm constantly driving home the importance of concrete diction, as opposed to the often-meaningless abstract diction many first-timers think sounds "poetic." I want my writing students, as often as possible, to think physically when they compose—and especially visually—in order to give their evolving imaginative instincts an actual shape to work with. And the plot skeleton exercise is a perfect accompaniment to this goal. The visual, sensory nature of that exercise skillfully*

> *communicates the importance of concrete, significant specifics when engaging with an audience. (P. M. Finn, personal communication, July 28, 2021)*

What intrigues Finn is how the Plot Skeleton activity involves the whole person and thus spurs true creativity in his students. The fact that the Plot Skeleton activity incorporates visual, auditory, and experiential ways of learning contributes hugely to its popularity with students and its effectiveness.

Ample Opportunities for Students to Engage

Research reveals that providing plenty of opportunities for students to participate in class activities promotes learning because it grabs their temporary interest that then promotes learning. According to Schraw et al. (2001), students need situational interest—temporary interest generated by the instructor, task, or text—to prompt them into developing personal interest. Personal interest holds their attention and creates lasting personal value.

The Plot Skeleton activity readily engages students on a superficial, temporary level. The numerous openings to verbally respond increase the chance of snagging the transitory engagement of the majority of the class members. This teacher-generated interest gives students the option of internally generating long-lasting interest, which leads to real learning. A study by Bekkering and Ward (2021) substantiates the connection between student participation and learning outcome. They found a clear correlation between student participation and scores on final exams in computer education classes.

Fun

Having fun in class does not necessarily cause learning directly, but it supports the learning environment. Tisza and Markopoulos (2021) see fun as,

> *a positive emotional experience during which the level of challenge meets the level of skills, one feels in control, loses the perception of time and space, lets go of social inhibitions, and is intrinsically motivated for the participation in the experience. (para. 11)*

In their study, Tisza and Markopoulos (2021) found that, while there is no direct link between fun and learning, there is a positive indirect effect. Because the student has fun, he or she develops a positive attitude toward the material being taught. The student's positive attitude has a significant impact on their overall learning.

During the whole-class plotting activity, students experience the excitement of creating a story, which produces a positive emotional experience. The positive feelings are optimized because students are "tested" at their skill level. The sense that they, as a class, are in control of the story enables them to immerse themselves in the activity without concern for how long the process is taking or even where the activity is physically taking place. This loss of self-awareness frees them from self-consciousness and fuels their desire to live "in the moment" of the experience. The evolution of these steps ultimately causes students to more easily internalize the underlying concepts being communicated.

Researchers in "Systematic Review of Enjoyment Element in Health-Related Game-Based Learning" take the enjoyment quotient in learning one step further, concluding that, "Playing games and having an enjoyable experience provides for a deeper learning that facilitates the process whereby the learner connects concepts, skills, and knowledge together in different situations and ultimately becomes more creative in their thinking and problem-solving" (Jalil et al., 2020, p. 50). While the Plot Skeleton activities are not overtly competitive, students do have the sense that they are playing a game rather than working at learning.

Employing Group Process

Researchers say group work facilitates learning. According to Chickering and Gamson (1987), good practice in undergraduate education involves giving students the opportunity to cooperatively work together, which promotes active learning and supplies prompt feedback. According to Chickering and Gamson (1987), active learning should include talking and writing about the material, relating it to their past experiences, and applying it to their own lives.

Students participating in the large-group Plot Skeleton activity and the breakout groups of four must work together toward a common goal—a serviceable plot. They experience active learning by discussing possible plot scenarios and writing down ideas. Students' plot suggestions naturally arise from their past experiences in life or literature.

In the whole-class activity, instructor feedback is given at each plot point. In the small groups, once their plots are built, they report back to the class and receive instructor feedback. Students eventually apply the concepts they are discussing to their own stories. Thus, all the tenets of active learning are met.

Classroom anthropologist Brian Cambourne (2000) believes that learning, or behavior change, happens when the learner has models, feedback, peer support, and a lot of practice. Learners move from novice to expert through social interactions with others who are more knowledgeable. As learners share expertise with peers, the learning continues.

The Plot Skeleton activity provides a plot model via the plot that the class collectively builds. Feedback is given throughout the activity. Learners experience peer support as they interact in the small group setting. This is illustrated by former student Janke, who says,

> *When working with classmates in a group setting, I was nervous to share my story/ plot ideas with others. However, once I realized that everyone felt the same way, I found it was actually pretty fun to build a story together and receive constructive feedback from my group. It helped me see what ideas work well for a story that resonates with others and what ideas need work. When the group expressed how much they liked some of my ideas, I left class that day with a drive to keep sharing my thoughts, even when it felt embarrassing, because I was able to listen to the helpful opinions of other writers and see the value in my work and theirs. (M. Janke, personal communication, July 29, 2021)*

Most students would share similar testimonials to Janke's. Researchers Tenenbaum et al. (2020) concur with the value Janke places on the social aspect of group interaction, stating, "Our findings indicate that the benefits of peer interaction can be realized by educators if they create opportunities not just for discussion, but also for the negotiation of a shared understanding" (p. 1319). This study saw the need for students to engage with each other beyond chatting; students need to work toward consensus to optimize learning, which the Plot Skeleton facilitates.

Overall, the Plot Skeleton activities successfully taught students how to plot because they employed proven educational tools.

RESULTS

While these teaching theories work together to create an effective learning model, some aspects have a greater impact on students' absorption and ability to incorporate plotting in their own creative works.

Teaching Tools that Enhance Learning

A professor's positive view of his or her students can infuse students with hope and energy that aids the learning process. This momentum can propel students over many pitfalls as they learn. For example, a student may at first fail to understand that a story goal must run through the heart of the plot to keep the story on track. They may want to take the story on a tangent that has nothing to do with the main storyline. When corrected by the instructor or another learner, the student will readjust his thinking to incorporate the new knowledge. The student will naturally climb over obstacles to learning. Therefore, the instructor's attitude toward their students can greatly facilitate or hinder the student's learning.

Giving students many chances to participate in class is extremely helpful in engaging them in the learning process, but it serves as a peripheral rather than central concept in teaching. In a faculty pedagogical workshop, Grand Canyon University Dean Sherman Elliott (2017) encouraged professors to obtain at least one verbal response from every student in the room. This is an excellent means to draw students into what is happening in the classroom and certainly contributes to their learning. However, the absence of participation openings does not mean the students will fail to grasp the material. For example, students succeed in online classes that do not accommodate any verbal responses.

The concept of "fun" is not essential to learning. Few people would mention "fun" as a perk of studying for one's driver's test. But people master the rules of the road and the mechanics of driving an automobile every day to pass the Division of Motor Vehicles driver's exam. Still, fun is a worthwhile classroom goal that, like the scent of coffee, draws the student into the learning percolating in

the classroom. Fun serves as a conduit to student engagement. While students can engage by an act of will when fun is absent, enjoyment organically causes students to want to learn. Fun can expunge the feeling of "work" from learning. It can induce students to cling to the learning process more passionately and, possibly, cause students to retain information more efficiently.

Teaching Tools Essential to Learning

One critical lesson plan inclusion is "I-do, we-do, you-do" because it bridges the gap between theory and implementing the skill of plot building. The professor holds the student's hand as he or she makes the jump from plot points like obvious and hidden needs, conflict, climax to implementation in a story. For example, a student's successful plot might include corresponding story points such as this: "Jackson wants Paisley like his next breath, but he is unaware of the need for validation he never got from his father. He screws up his courage to declare himself, but Paisley catches Covid. While she is quarantined, Jack is ordered overseas with the Marines. Paisley's ex shows up." By walking the student through the process of building an actual story, the teacher helps him or her cross the canyon between idea and implementation. This crossing is further cemented by the second "we-do" experience when small groups create plots. By the time the student must conceive his story ("you-do"), he or she has practiced twice and has gained a working knowledge of his personal creative task ahead.

Another essential is planning learning activities that address visual, auditory, and experiential learners. This ensures that all students in the classroom have the opportunity to learn. Teaching in multiple ways of learning makes sense logically and is necessary for student success. Since plotting is so complex, an instructor needs to do everything possible to communicate to every writer in the room. If students were only given the Plot Skeleton diagram, the visual learners would immediately "see" what elements they needed to flesh out in their stories. But the auditory and experiential learners would struggle to comprehend their task. When an instructor teaches to all learner types, all students are set up for success. When leading students through the experience of plotting via the classroom Plot Skeleton activity, seeing, hearing, and doing cement the plotting concepts for each learner type. Granted, it is still a leap from theory to practice for each writer, but half of the battle is understanding the foundational ideas. For example, a student needs to understand that the story must resolve at the end. The story does not have to conclude happily ever after. Every story thread does not have to be answered. But there must be a sense of completion. If the writer does not first understand what an ending entails, they cannot create one in their own story.

Group process, which overlaps with "we-do," is vital to teaching plotting. One could consider groups a highly effective teaching aid but not necessary for learning to transpire. Everyone has sat in a lemon of a group, waiting for the agony to end. This experience, though tedious, did not prevent learning. However, when groups work as designed, they unlock students' critical thinking, provide a platform for practice, and socially reinforce learning. The Plot Skeleton utilizes two group sessions that are key to students absorbing the concepts. Without groups, plotting would be much more arduous to master.

Communicating to all learning types, utilizing the gradual release of responsibility teaching method, and employing group process are indispensable to student success. The other teaching tools aid the learning process by playing supporting roles.

REFLECTIVE CRITIQUE

This reflection has shown how important analyzing one's teaching is to an instructor's effectiveness in transferring knowledge to his or her students. Before committing to reflective practice, I might have attributed dreaming up the Plot Skeleton TV-writer activity to beginner's luck. Or, on deeper thought, I might have concluded that, rather than being a novice teacher, I had adopted an intuitive teaching style. After all, I had been teaching something all my life. As a teen, I taught elderly women terrified of water to swim. I taught my four children to read and later volunteered as the art appreciation teacher in their elementary schools. I also served as a U.S. Census trainer and a substitute high school teacher. In church, I did everything from leading small groups to lecturing for large Bible studies. When I began teaching university courses, I took a pragmatic approach, intuitively sensing whether the students were absorbing the material, pivoting, and trying another tactic as needed. However, Dewey (1910) recommends a more intentional thought process:

> *It is its [education's] business to cultivate deep-seated and effective habits of discriminating tested beliefs from mere assertions, guesses, and opinions; to develop a lively, sincere, and open-minded preference for conclusions that are properly grounded, and to ingrain into the individual's working habits methods of inquiry and reasoning appropriate to the various problems that present themselves. (p. 28)*

Dewey would still have me think deeper, specifically about what elements caused my teaching vehicle to work.

Reflective thinking cannot give absolute reasons why the Plot Skeleton or any other classroom activity fails or succeeds. Reflective practice is not meant to provide an exhaustive study of each aspect of teaching addressed. Rather, the reflection follows the writer's own reasoning process, backed by predecessors who arrived at similar conclusions. Dewey (1910) says, "The proper function of imagination is vision of realities that cannot be exhibited under existing conditions of sense-perception. Clear insight into the remote, the absent, the obscure is its aim" (p. 224). Therefore, reflective practice can only be as successful as the participant's ability to imagine logical outcomes. Still, most educators probably possess the skills necessary to successfully engage in reflective practice.

The unexpected outcome of Dewey's method of deep reflection was an overall improvement in my teaching. While teaching intuitively works fairly well, analyzing why proved enlightening. I can apply this knowledge in the future as I plan my classes. Now that I understand why holding high opinions and expectations of my students facilitates a positive learning environment, I can take pains to intentionally communicate this attitude to them. Rather than accidentally—or even intuitively—falling into a classroom activity involving visual, auditory, and experiential aspects of communicating information, I can consciously build such activities into future lesson plans. By reflecting, I learned that providing students with many chances to participate verbally in class hooks their temporary interest, which leads to prolonged interest that results in learning. Knowing this, motivates me to include as many opportunities as possible for students to verbally participate in future classes. Since fun swings open the door to learning, I will look for ways to make instruction more enjoyable for students. In addition, understanding that the group process supports learning socially and cognitively motivates me to continue to employ group activities. Comprehending that the "I-do, we-do, you-do" teaching model gradually transfers responsibility from teacher to student causes me to value the method more than I have in the past. I, therefore, expect to use it more frequently in the classroom. Reflective practice and the resulting intentionality will strengthen my intuitive style of teaching.

In the future, I would like to set aside time each summer to analyze some aspect of my teaching to better understand why it caused or failed to cause learning. Making reflective practice part of my annual routine will continue to strengthen my teaching regularly.

Instructors of foundational creative writing classes might want to try the Plot Skeleton to teach their students how to plot short stories for the above reasons. All teachers might strengthen their teaching skills by applying reflective practice to their own effective (or ineffective) learning modules to determine what positive or negative practices are transpiring. They will be similarly enlightened and energized. And as a result, their teaching will take a healthy leap forward.

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I have no conflicts of interest to disclose.

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