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A Flash of Understanding: Utilizing Flash-Length Creative Writing in the Empowerment and Identity Development of Young Women

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**A Flash of Understanding: Utilizing Flash-Length Creative Writing in the Empowerment
and Identity Development of Young Women**

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2023

MERRIMACK COLLEGE

CAPSTONE PAPER SIGNATURE PAGE

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OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE

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AUTHOR: Hope Martin

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Abstract

This project's purpose was to evaluate the potential strengths and areas for improvement of the Flash of Understanding curriculum for young women to combat the mental health crisis faced by this population. The curriculum, utilizing flash-length creative writing as its main tool, seeks to strengthen knowledge of creative writing craft, deepen understanding of social justice concepts, and combat isolation in the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic. Content was created utilizing Creative Youth Development (CYD) as a framework, which as a discipline places equal importance on creative skill development and the personal growth of youth (Montgomery, 2017). The curriculum outline was presented to four reviewers via a structured interview process who have experience in creative writing education, youth development, or community engagement. All reviewers reacted positively to the curriculum and provided suggestions for implementation. Significant findings from this review process include: a favorable response to the balance between creative writing and social justice, the importance of emphasizing boundaries among program participants, and the suggestion of including outside reading to address any gaps in knowledge among participants.

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A Flash of Understanding: Utilizing Flash-Length Creative Writing in the Empowerment and Identity Development of Young Women

As a post-COVID world develops, young people need connection and community. According to the Office of the Surgeon General (2021), the incidence of psychological distress among young people has increased since the onslaught of the COVID-19 pandemic and the accompanied isolation. Moreover, the increased public attention to systemic oppression during this same period of time, including the murder of George Floyd being broadcast nationwide and the uptick in hate crimes faced by Asian-Americans, may be among the contributing factors to youth mental health concerns (Office of the Surgeon General, 2021). Even prior to the pandemic, half of surveyed female high school students reported persistent feelings of sadness or hopelessness in 2019 (Office of the Surgeon General, 2021, p. 3).

With all the challenges faced by young people in general due to the pandemic, young women face disproportionate effects on their mental health and wellbeing. Between July 2021 and May 2022, LePage and Javaid (2022) with the National Women's Law Center found that 54.3% of young women ages 18-24 had symptoms of depression or anxiety, compared to 40.2% of young men of the same age. 81% of young disabled women ages 18-24 had symptoms of depression or anxiety; 53.7% of young Black, non-Hispanic women and 50.3% of young Latinas were affected by depression or anxiety symptoms (LePage & Javaid, 2022). With these marginalized communities facing barriers to mental health care access as is, and disproportionate economic impacts of the pandemic (LePage & Javaid, 2022), there is a need for community-based initiatives.

Youth development organizations and professionals are among the groups of people who have been stretched thin in trying to address this crisis and the aftermath of pandemic-related

isolation. Creative Youth Development (CYD) is a branch of youth development that specifically utilizes artistic skill development as a mechanism for personal growth (Montgomery, 2017). There is potential in the growing field of CYD to empower young people through not only developing creative skills and knowledge, but also a sense of belonging amongst their peers (Montgomery, 2017).

Creative writing, in its inherent utilization of storytelling, is a tool for empowerment with much potential in helping young women express their emotions, identities, and to learn from each other. Twomey (2011) found that adolescent female participants involved in a feminist literary journal not only explored their own struggles and experiences of girlhood, but later reflected on how their and others' work in the journal guided them towards social justice and an understanding of interconnectedness with others. Schreuder (2011) found that her adolescent female subject used writing to positively explore and repair her relationship with herself and peers in relation to her mental health.

In line with the benefits creative writing can offer to young women, this project proposes a curriculum of learning materials and creative writing exercises that will assist creative youth development practitioners in creating spaces for young women to utilize their creativity in exploring both their own experiences and broader social issues. A group workshop model will come into play when participants write their own creative pieces, as a means of community building and exposure to others' lived experiences. The goal is for the curriculum to help adolescent girls and young women find solidarity and community amongst each other to help buoy them through the challenges of their young adulthood, and to use their voice to advocate for others.

The contents of this curriculum are largely rooted in Creative Youth Development (Montgomery, 2017), Intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1991), and Feminist Pedagogy (Webb, Walker & Allen, 2012). Utilizing flash-length creative writing (defined for the purposes of this project as any creative piece that amounts to 1,000 words or less) in both the learning materials and assigned writing prompts to participants will provide an accessible avenue for creative writers of all experience levels to engage in telling the stories that matter most to them. The curriculum will have clear guidelines for nurturing an inclusive space for young women writers of all identities and encouraging dialogue around differences in identity and lived experience between participants.

Literature Review

The National Alliance on Mental Illness (2022) found that during the COVID-19 pandemic, 3 million adolescents (ages 12-17) in the United States had serious thoughts of suicide, and 3.8 million young adults (ages 18-25) had serious thoughts of suicide. Additionally, young people with marginalized identities faced a heightened risk for mental health challenges, which includes but is not limited to LGBTQ+, Black, Latinx, Asian-American, Indigenous, disabled, and low-income youth (Office of the Surgeon General, 2021). This is in part due to the additional struggles faced by their communities, including higher COVID-19 rates, an increase in hate crimes, connectivity issues, and a loss of school and community supports (Office of the Surgeon General, 2021).

While young people ultimately have resiliency and the stress of disasters does not always go on to cause mental health disorders (Office of the Surgeon General, 2021), there is a need for community-building among youth as they emerge from the shadow of isolation. The uncertainty of the pandemic and all of the rippling effects faced by many have created a sense of unease and

dread among many young people. Even without a pandemic that necessitates social distancing as a mitigation strategy, many youths deal with feelings of isolation or loneliness that lead to mental distress. However, it must be noted that true social isolation can do a world of harm to body and to mind—it has been found that social isolation and loneliness are twice as harmful to one’s physical and mental health than obesity (Novotney, 2020). The creative arts, such as visual art, music, and writing, are a tool that can help mitigate these challenges and bring people together.

Literature in particular can provide a vehicle for coping with hardship, community-building, self-exploration, and empowerment. For example, Deveney and Lawson (2021) found that all of the participants in their wellness-focused creative writing class reported benefits to cognitive and emotional functioning. Serup et. al. (2020), found that participants in their therapeutic creative writing groups experienced improvements in self-esteem, as well as increased trust in themselves and social situations. And in Schreuder (2022)’s Girl Power online poetry group for adolescent girls, the subject of her case study, expressed that the group helped her grapple with her peers, her body, and herself; she also gained a sense of agency over her experiences and her work helped her articulate a healing process. Participants in the Girl Power poetry group were guided through writing prompts that leaned towards empowerment for themselves and for their peers (Schreuder, 2022).

Empowerment could be defined in short by the American Psychological Association (n.d., para.1) as “the promotion of the skills, knowledge, and confidence necessary to take greater control of one’s life”, but the context varies across disciplines and situations. Creative writing, and reading the literature of others, can serve as a vehicle to explore and process experiences of oneself and others in a way that can arc towards empowerment.

The Development of Identity

For a common definition, the American Psychological Association defines identity as, “an individual’s sense of self defined by (a) a set of physical, psychological, and interpersonal characteristics that is not wholly shared with any other person and (b) a range of affiliations (e.g., ethnicity) and social roles. Identity involves a sense of continuity, or the feeling that one is the same person today that one was yesterday or last year (despite physical or other changes). Such a sense is derived from one’s body sensations; one’s body image; and the feeling that one’s memories, goals, values, expectations, and beliefs belong to the self” (American Psychological Association, n.d., para.1).

Viewed through this psychological lens, the role of creating literature in identity development could serve many purposes. Exploring one’s experiences can help with the articulation of memories, values, and beliefs; reading the experiences of others and having conversations about the literature can serve as a vehicle to becoming acquainted with the experiences of others, including those outside one’s own affiliated identity groups or social roles.

Building identity for adolescent girls and young women can be especially challenging because of the oppression that women face under patriarchy and the added layers oppression that many face if they have additional marginalized social identities. Coming of age into a society that does not equally value one’s existence is a large obstacle to gaining one’s footing in the world as an adult and feeling confident in one’s experiences.

Feminist Theory is rooted in the exploration of gender inequality and the experiences of women in society. As in other pedagogical frameworks, one key idea that can be employed within a feminist model of instruction is to restructure the relationship between instructor and student, to build a culture in which everyone is teaching and learning from each other in a less

hierarchical manner (Webb et. al, 2002). Developing a community within the classroom space that is focused on growth and collaboration is also key and is in antithesis to traditional patriarchal views (Webb et. al., 2002). Additionally, respect for individual experiences and “encouraging authority in others” (p.70) are elements that empower students to embrace diverse perspectives (Webb et. al., 2002). Other key components of feminist pedagogy identified by Webb et. al. (2002) are empowerment and community building.

Intersectionality, coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw (1991), is a framework that examines the way that different social identities overlap to create different experiences of privilege or oppression in an individual’s experiences. It would be in antithesis to feminist pedagogy to not also have intersectionality at the forefront--intersectionality provides a mindset by which to examine the lived experiences of students, peers, instructors, and authors with the full nuance with which they deserve.

An intersectional feminist framework of instruction goes against a patriarchal mindset by valuing individualized experiences of power in society, rather than a narrow-cut top-to-bottom hierarchy rooted in gender, race, and social class. Providing an intentional and supportive space for young women to wrestle with their intersectional identities through creativity is a tool for creating solidarity amongst the group and setting the groundwork for empathy to others’ experiences of their social identities.

McMillan and Chavis (1986) theorized that there are four main elements that somebody must experience to feel a sense of community: membership, influence, integration and fulfillment of needs, and shared emotional connection. A feminist and anti-oppressive creative writing group can provide many of these elements for young people, a place where they can share their lived experiences and be heard by others, an environment in which their feedback on

their peers' work is heard and valued and shared emotional connection through the process of workshopping and discussing pieces of writing. Shared emotional connection also in part comes from a shared history that group members identify with, though they do not need to have experienced it (McMillan & Chavis, 1986) and therefore identity-focused literature is such a powerful tool. By bringing together young people and writers of shared and differing backgrounds, communal histories can be tapped into and valued by the group.

Therapeutic Writing Workshops

Therapeutic writing workshops are more clinically focused towards mental health rather than identity development, and have been found to have benefits; Sandbäck et. al. (2021) found, through a lens of caring science, that their participants reported themes of emotional release and self-compassion. Chandler (2002) found that group writing, as opposed to writing alone, can increase connections to others through learning and empathy. Wise et. al. (2012) found that participants in their creative writing group for adolescents living with HIV reported an increased desire to share experiences with others, higher levels of confidence, and peer support within the group. Additionally, as their group went on, facilitators noted that participants spoke of their experiences living with HIV more openly (Wise et. al., 2012).

Youth Identity and Social Justice

For young people coming of age into a deeply unjust society, an understanding of social justice and the role they play within it is crucial. In particular, it is crucial that youth have safe spaces in which to engage with theories and topics around social justice in a way that will provide both a safe space for them to learn from the experiences and challenges of other social identities, as well as share their own lived experiences. The popular “mirrors and windows” theory (Bishop, 1990) emphasizes the importance of young people seeing reflections of their

own experiences, and “windows” into others’ experiences, represented in the media and literature they are exposed to. Youth of marginalized may lack adequate exposure to these “mirrors” due to book bans, underrepresentation in literature, bias in the education system, and systemic inequities impacting the literature available to them. Creative writing workshops are one way in which a space such as this can be facilitated, as they provide the opportunity to both listen and be heard.

Creative Youth Development

Creative Youth Development (CYD) in the United States can trace some of its background to the Hull House community center, which was founded in 1889 as a settlement house and provided tuition-free arts programs for children of immigrants. By 1914, over 400 such centers, most of which offered similar arts programs, were present nationwide (Montgomery, 2017). Additional roots of CYD lay in the legacy of local arts agencies in the country, prevalent in the 1950’s and 1960’s through present day—members of this movement often facilitated afterschool arts programs for youth (Montgomery, 2017). The metamorphosis to the modern Creative Youth Development movement, however, happened primarily in the 1980’s and 1990’s, when artists took up the helm of developing more holistic arts programs with a specific belief in the potential of youth (Montgomery, 2017).

CYD places importance on both rigorous artistic skill development and on the personal growth and sense of belonging for young people (Montgomery, 2017). CYD programs are additionally intentional in both empowering young people to orchestrate the change in their own lives as well as helping them nurture their inherent strengths to guide them successfully into adulthood (Montgomery, 2017). It is key that instructors in these programs are practicing artists in the discipline focused on by the program, who are able to create welcoming and affirming

spaces as well as serve as a positive adult mentor for the youth participants (Montgomery, 2017). An additional thread common to CYD programs is that they are process-oriented (Jacobs, 2019). Process-oriented CYD programs can give youth a voice when they go against traditional power dynamics in a classroom and provide a space to address community issues (Jacobs, 2019).

When exploring creative writing as a discipline to be used in a CYD curriculum, it is important to understand norms that may be counterintuitive to larger goals. Many creative writing programs operate through the silent workshop model, in which a student's work is critiqued by the rest of the class and the instructor while the student remains silent to absorb feedback. While this has its merits in terms of developing an understanding of how a reader might experience one's work, a CYD-oriented creative writing program would benefit from a workshop model with more reciprocal dialogue, to give agency to its participants and lessen the instructor-student hierarchy. Additionally, choosing to highlight authors with intersectional identities and those who may have shared experiences with the youth participants can serve to increase the value participants' place in diverse experiences, which is a key element to feminist pedagogy (Webb et. al., 2002). Creative writing education also often serves as a method for fostering critical thinking and analysis skills, as developing critical consciousness is key to the process of writing (Clifton, 2022).

Current Project

For the purposes of this project, a creative writing curriculum specifically targeted at adolescent girls and young women between the ages of 16-22 will be developed and shared with faculty and staff engaged in youth development, social justice, and creative writing education who have an interest in tying creative outlets into their work. The curriculum will feature deep reflection, group discussion, and flash-length creative writing prompts. Flash-length creative

writing is any piece of creative writing under 1,000 words, as they can easily be read aloud, discussed, and used as a model text by participants within an hour and a half-long session.

Fiction writer Amber Sparks has remarked, “I submit that women have learned how to make small fictions because they have had to, and like everything women writers do, they have turned a “small” form into an art and started a fire in the world” (Sparks, 2016, para. 4). As noted in the quote, flash fiction (also known as short-short stories by some), is a common genre, but flash creative nonfiction, such as memoir or personal essay is also common, and many if not most poems also fall under the word count that would make them eligible to be included in the curriculum. The project will review the goals of the curriculum and the topics included to determine ways to strengthen the curriculum design for possible implementation.

Curriculum Plan

In a post-pandemic world rife with injustice, adolescent girls and young women need settings in which they can feel part of a community and develop their understanding of social justice. This creative writing curriculum will be rooted in the theory of intersectionality and employing principles of feminist pedagogy. It aims to encourage young women writers of all backgrounds to develop their skills in flash-length creative writing and a deepened sense of their own identity, as well as an increased understanding surrounding topics of social justice.

Situation Statement

Creative writing groups for youth have been found to have many benefits, including increased self-esteem and agency over participants’ own experiences (Schreuder, 2022), as well as increased peer support (Wise et. al., 2012) and a drive towards social justice (Twomey, 2011).

Define Your Goals

- Goal 1: Engage young women in conversations surrounding identity and social justice using creative writing as a mechanism for learning and expression
- Goal 2: Develop young women's capacity to share their experiences with others
- Goal 3: Develop young women's skillsets in creative writing

Target Audience

The target audience for this curriculum review will be faculty and facilitators engaged with creative writing education, as well as staff members engaged with youth development or social justice education who are interested in utilizing creative outlets in their work.

Crafting a Clear Message

Youth participants in this multi-genre flash-length writing curriculum will learn from the published work of women writers who have come before them and express their own experiences of identity through creative work in a group workshop format.

Identify Key Elements of the Curriculum

The key components to the curriculum will include a map of ten 90-minute sessions, with the format as follows: model flash-length prose or poetry texts for participants to read together, followed by a guided discussion of the social justice concepts and empowerment touched on in the selected work; a writing prompt for participants to reflect on their experiences with this concept in their own lived experience; group sharing and small group workshops of the participants' written work. If implemented, the curriculum could be assessed by participant interviews, as well as qualitative assessments of workshop discussions and participants' written work.

Responsibilities Chart

NAME	ORGANIZATION OR AFFILIATION	RESPONSIBILITIES	CONTACT INFORMATION
Hope Martin	Merrimack College	Curriculum Developer	martinho@merrimack.edu

Curriculum Review Plan

I will engage an interdisciplinary group of individuals who backgrounds in any combination of creative writing education, social justice education, and youth development to review my curriculum. I plan to hold multiple review session, and keep representation among the different disciplines in mind during the scheduling process. I will be administering an interview protocol during both sessions, as well as sending a post-presentation survey to reviewers for some additional quantitative data. Areas to focus on for the interview protocol and post-presentation survey include: the balance of creative writing and social justice pedagogy; considerations for creating an inclusive environment for students of all identities; the social justice concepts included in the curriculum; the feasibility of instruction to an audience of young women in adolescence and young adulthood; any other identified challenges or gaps.

Implementation Timeline

January 2022	First iteration of curriculum concept designed
February 2022	Contact a selected group of reviewers; prepare to collect feedback through a post-presentation survey and structured interview process
March 2022	Presentations to reviewers; analysis of feedback, limitations of curriculum, and implications for future curriculum development
April 2022	4/14: Full capstone draft due 4/27: Submit final capstone paper for publication

Logical Framework**I will...**

Create a curriculum of learning materials and readings that surround prompts for flash-length creative writing projects for young women, which are rooted in feminist theory, anti-racism, LGBTQ+ identity and allyship, disability justice, intersectionality, creative youth development principles, among more.

So That:

Young women can use creativity to deepen their understanding of social justice concepts surrounding identity.

So That:

Young women can form a sense of belonging and increase their self-confidence through understanding their own identities and lived experiences through their writing.

So That:

Their creative work, the creative work of their peers, and the learning materials in the curriculum will encourage them to form connections and alleviate the effects of isolation.

So That:

Their understanding of creative writing, social justice, and their own experiences will lead them to feel a sense of belonging and engagement in their communities.

Methodology

The Flash of Understanding curriculum is designed to empower young women and in both identity development and creative writing. The curriculum was presented to a set of individuals with experience in creative writing education, higher education, secondary education, youth development, and community engagement. Following the interviews with the curriculum

reviewers, the content of their feedback went through qualitative analysis to pull out the themes of everyone's responses to the curriculum review as well as any overarching patterns present. The demographics of reviewers that were collected as part of the interview process were analyzed alongside feedback provided and averaged for all participants to look for any potential correlations in the data.

Participants

To get insight from individuals in a variety of fields that could potentially be involved in the implementation of this curriculum, multiple individuals were invited to participate in the review and interview process. The Flash of Understanding curriculum was presented to four individuals: one tenured creative writing faculty member at a liberal arts college (Reviewer 1), one secondary education English and Language Arts teacher (Reviewer 2), one staff member of a public library (Reviewer 3), and one staff member who works at a multigenerational community center that serves teens and young adults as part of their mission (Reviewer 4). All reviewers work in the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania in their respective fields.

Materials

All curriculum review and interview sessions were conducted via Zoom. A PowerPoint (Appendix A) was used in the curriculum review process to provide the reviewers with an overview and summary of the curriculum's goals and purpose, as well as walk them through a sample session of the format. The sample session provided to the reviewers consisted of an Intersectionality-themed session consisting of: a model text, discussion questions that connect the model text to Intersectionality, and a writing prompt that invites participants to connect the theme and use the model text as inspiration to write about their own experiences. Additionally,

the PowerPoint contains some guidance on how to facilitate constructive, directed and supportive critiques among participants.

An interview protocol (Appendix B) was gone over with reviewers after the conclusion of the PowerPoint presentation. The questions were developed in the interest of not being skewed towards any particular outcome—rather, they focused on general impressions of the curriculum, the balance between creative writing education and social justice, and whether the reviewers felt the curriculum could realistically be implemented in any of the community settings they have experience with. Additionally, the interview protocol was designed to get reviewers' feedback on strengths and weaknesses of the curriculum, potential environments for future implementation, as well as any additional themes they could identify to prioritize within the curriculum. Demographic information was gathered from the reviewers at the conclusion of the interview protocol: age range, level of experience with creative writing education, and level of experience working with youth on issues of social justice or personal discovery.

Procedure

Reviewers were selected for their range of experience across different sectors that support youth, including multiple levels of education and different sectors of community organizations. Reviewers were sent an initial invitation that consisted of a brief description of the project, a potential timeline of the reviews taking place in late February to mid-March, and a note that they would not have to prepare anything ahead of the review session or do any specific work after its conclusion. Once the reviewers expressed interest in participating, individual and small group interviews were scheduled for early and mid-March based on availability.

All curriculum review sessions were recorded with the permission of the reviewers to ensure accuracy of feedback being analyzed. Notes and observations were taken down as well

during the curriculum review and interview process to provide an overall summary before the qualitative analysis process began.

Qualitative analysis after the conclusion of the curriculum review process consisted of building an Excel workbook of all reviewers' responses during the interview protocol and any further thoughts or feedback they provided at the conclusion of the protocol. Once themes were identified for each participants' individual responses, overarching themes from all participants were also identified to be further explored as implications for the development and implementation of the curriculum. Additionally, the demographic information of the reviewers was analyzed alongside their responses to identify any potential correlations between themes.

Findings

Three curriculum review interviews were held via Zoom in early March 2023. The first interviewee was Reviewer 1, a tenured creative writing faculty member at a liberal arts college. Reviewer 2 and Reviewer 3 were interviewed together: Reviewer 2 is a secondary education English and Language Arts teacher; Reviewer 3 is a staff member at a public library who also holds an MFA in Creative Writing. Reviewer 4, a staff member at a multigenerational community center that works mainly in youth programming, was the final interview participant.

Two reviewers fall into the 18-25 age range, one reviewer in 26-40, and one in 41-55. One reviewer ranked themselves as having extensive (10+ years) of experience with creative writing education, two as having moderate (6-9) years of experience, and one as having minimal (1-3 years) of experience. For experience working with youth on issues of social justice, one reviewer ranked themselves as having extensive experience, two as having fair experience (3-5 years), and one as having minimal experience (1-2 years).

Impressions of Curriculum

All four reviewers expressed interest and positivity when asked about their initial impressions of the curriculum. Reviewer 1 noted that it was a helpful, straightforward, and multi-modal approach to instruction for less experienced writers, that the length is manageable, and that the elements of the curriculum seem appropriate. Reviewer 2 expressed that the curriculum gives a great opportunity for youth to gain exposure to creative writing and social justice while allowing them to connect emotions to craft. Reviewer 3 said as well that connecting the curriculum material to personal experience of youth participants is valuable, and that processing and reflecting through writing, allowing for catharsis and development, has potential. Reviewer 4 expressed interest in the curriculum and shared that they felt it would be interesting to implement in the primarily conservative area in which they grew up, noting gaps in access to social justice knowledge that can sometimes be prevalent in these regions.

Balance Between Social Justice and Creative Writing Education

Reviewers generally noted a desirable balance between social justice and creative writing education in the curriculum. Reviewer 1 noted that, in their years of experience teaching creative writing at the college level, “social justice and creative writing are inexplicably linked together”. They felt that the curriculum had the right idea in merging these concepts. Reviewer 2 felt that the curriculum had a good balance of these two elements and suggested that short excerpts of critical writings could be potential model texts as well. Reviewer 3 wondered if there could be homework, such as extra readings, between sessions to allow participants to become more familiar with social justice vocabulary—noting that this familiarity will help with connecting to the creative elements of the curriculum. Reviewer 4 said that the balance works well and that the

process of supporting and critiquing in a workshop setting is good for people who want to express themselves.

Feasibility of Learning Goals

All four reviewers felt that the curriculum had the potential to meet the three outlined learning goals. Reviewer 1 felt that each part of the curriculum session was clearly defined to meet one of the learning goals—in terms of the goal to improve creative writing craft, they recommended providing examples of sources of flash-length texts to facilitators, so that model texts can be updated and switched out as needed. Reviewer 2 felt that the goal of forming connections and alleviating isolation could be especially met, and that intentionally incorporating elements of social-emotional learning would be a welcome addition. Reviewer 3 also felt that the goal of combatting isolation was well-met by the curriculum outline presented in terms of forming connections using writing. They noted that in their experience with creative writing education, flash can sometimes be taught later on in a student’s development so there may be less exposure to the form prior to the curriculum. Reviewer 4 noted that the curriculum is a great opportunity to engage a group of youth against isolation, and that when working with the younger end of the age range it could be more difficult to gain a full understanding of social justice.

Potential Barriers

The reviewers identified a number of potential barriers in the implementation process and ways that youth may perceive the curriculum. Reviewer 1 identified the need to address “the issues of the time” and felt that updating the model texts utilized regularly would be beneficial to keeping the curriculum current. They also noted that for younger participants, parental permission to discuss social justice topics may be an issue, as might be an unsupportive home

environment (giving the example of having a participant who is a member of the LGBTQ+ community but not out to their family). Reviewer 1 also emphasized the importance of instilling in youth the need for boundaries and maintaining confidentiality given the nature of the program sessions, and that a small group size (ten or under) would be ideal. They noted that facilitators will need guidance on how to handle tensions that may arise within the group and how to stay up to date on issues that youth face—and that, in and of itself, finding the ideal facilitator for such a curriculum can be a barrier.

Reviewer 2 noted a reluctance of participants to open up to each other and gaps in knowledge surrounding social justice or narrative skill as potential barriers. They felt that it would be key to have strategies in mind ahead of time to address reluctance and bridge knowledge gaps and shared that their students take to the “windows and mirrors” theory well. This is the concept of literature having the potential to be either a mirror of one’s own experiences, or a window into other’s experiences (Bishop, 1990).

Reviewer 3 also noted discomfort and knowledge gaps as potential barriers, and that with the short (ten-week-long) nature of the curriculum the participants would need to get comfortable quickly. They suggested utilizing small group discussions as a possible tactic to help with increasing comfortability with each other based on their experience in the classroom. Reviewer 4 felt that engaging with the texts may be harder for high school students and thought the material may better be suited for the college age group (18 and up). They also noted a potential clash with conservative families, and advised remaining clear, open, and receptive during the implementation process to ease discomfort.

Potential Environments for Implementation

The reviewers provided a wide range of environments they thought this curriculum could be implemented successfully in. Reviewer 1 felt it could be turned into an afterschool club at a high school, utilized in a community center, or could be utilized in a college setting as part of an extracurricular leadership training program. They also expressed that they felt it could be adapted to be more therapeutic in nature as well and could be used by clinical staff or social workers.

Reviewer 2 thought it might fit well in an arts-based charter school, or as an interdisciplinary elective in a high school—and that it could be viable in a liberal arts college setting. They also felt that with a bit more work the curriculum could also be adapted for younger students and noted that the Lucille Clifton poem “won’t you celebrate with me” that was shared as a sample model text is one that they use with their own middle school students.

Reviewer 3 agreed with Reviewer 2’s suggestions and felt that it could be implemented in a larger college setting as well, noting that the interdisciplinary nature of it would appeal to students and to the administration. They noted that it could be adapted to meet the learning objectives and goals of a higher education institution. Reviewer 3 also offered up community arts programs as a possible environment for the curriculum, noting a youth outreach program held by a literary organization they are familiar with.

Reviewer 4 felt that it would work well at a community center such as the one they work at—in their experience, the youth who attend view it as a neutral, safe, and open space. As they work in a rural area, there would not be as much diversity, but the youth would tend to feel comfortable, which is key to engagement. They also said they could see it working well in a liberal arts college setting where there would be more diversity of identity and experience among participants.

Final Thoughts and Suggestions

When wrapping up the interview protocol portion of the curriculum review session, the reviewers had shared most of their thoughts in the previous questions. Reviewer 1 noted that they felt the curriculum had a lot of potential. Reviewer 2 offered up the suggestion of using a daily check-in exercise to start off the curriculum sessions, and noted again that emphasizing boundaries from the very beginning would be key. Reviewer 2 also noted that if a facilitator has mandated reporter status, they will need to discuss that responsibility with youth, particularly if they are writing creative nonfiction. Reviewer 3 agreed with Reviewer 2 and noted that the curriculum is something they themselves would want to go teach. They would want to emphasize the importance of being mindful of other participants by giving supportive feedback and using content warnings for potentially triggering topics. Reviewer 4 shared again that they like the combination of creative writing and social justice and that they are excited to see what will come of the curriculum in the future.

Discussion

The basis for the research that turned into the Flash of Understanding curriculum was heavily interdisciplinary in nature. I noticed quickly that much of the research I sought out while trying to understand the impact of creative writing on youth was more clinical in nature, while I wanted to take an approach that was more social-emotional and could be facilitated by individuals without therapeutic licenses. Ultimately, I found the home for this curriculum within the framework of creative youth development. This allowed for equal focus to be placed on developing youth's skills in writing and using this as a tool for connection and expression as they resiliently grow through, around, and despite the negative impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic.

All reviewers throughout the feedback process remarked on the pairing of social justice

education and creative writing as being compatible and, in the sentiment of Reviewer 1, those two topics have been inextricable in every creative writing class they've taught throughout their career. It was my experience throughout my own creative writing undergraduate education that this was an unspoken and almost universally acknowledged "truth" among my community of creative writers, as we were youth being shaped by our own work, the work of each other, and the work of our mentors. The education framework of "windows, mirrors, and sliding doors" (Bishop, 1990) that was referenced by Reviewer 3 during their interview protocol sums this up well. Literature can serve as a mirror through which individuals can see their own experiences reflected back at them, therefore allowing for processing and reflection—or a window through which they can "see" into another's experience with enough likeness to bear some witness to it (Bishop, 1990).

Overall, reviewers noted a few key points for consideration in further development of the curriculum: the potential for wide knowledge gaps between youth in regard to social justice education and creative writing, the need for strong community-building, respect, and boundaries, potential clashing against conservative family values, and the agreed-upon potential for alleviating isolation among youth participants.

One possibility to be considered in addressing knowledge gaps that may exist between youth participants who come into the program with varying knowledge on the topics would be to implement outside reading assignments prior to each weekly session. While that was not in the initial curriculum outline, as the intention was not to feel like added "work" for youth, it was brought up during the review process that the ten sessions and structured time may not be enough for all participants to be fully confident with social justice vocabulary and/or creative writing craft. While some participants will have some background knowledge that they would be able to

build off in this format, if a participant is coming with a blank slate additional readings and resources may help with this process of “catching them up to speed”.

There is also the idea of lengthening the curriculum to a greater number of weeks, perhaps twelve or fourteen, to allow more foundational work to take place at the beginning. As the curriculum stood in the review stage, it was designed that there would be ten weekly sessions, with two weeks each spent on the following five topics: feminism and feminist theory, anti-racism, LGBTQ+ inclusion and allyship, disability justice, and intersectionality. With the sessions planned to be ninety minutes long, which includes time for writing and small group critique of pieces, there is not a lot of room for deviation from the outline. Adding a few additional weeks added to serve as “crash course” weeks in social justice terminology and basic elements creative writing craft, youth participants could at least share that as foundational knowledge before jumping into the rest of the curriculum elements. Combatting these potential knowledge gaps in social justice terminology among participants will be crucial for allowing for community-building around the sharing of experiences, which is a key goal of the curriculum. Expanding the background education that participants receive on creative writing craft and style is key for adherence to the principles of creative youth development in the sense of putting equal priority on artistic development (Montgomery, 2017).

In terms of utilizing boundaries for positive community-building, based on feedback I would like to increase the guidance on this available to potential facilitators. While there are some provided written guidelines for the critique process of youth reviewing each other’s work, it will be important moving forward to build upon that and include additional strategies for creating a caring, safe, and brave community within the group. Some examples that would be crucial in establishing that would be keeping strict confidentiality in regards to the sessions,

utilizing content warnings on pieces that may be triggering, and setting ground rules to establish trust and holding everyone accountable to them.

Limitations of the Project

A few notable limitations of this project are data being pulled from a small number of reviewers and not having the curriculum reviewed by any youth within the targeted age range prior to completion of the project. With only four reviewers, even coming from different sectors of work, there is only a limited amount of feedback available on the construction of the curriculum.

Additionally, even with all the education and youth development experience represented among the reviewers, only youth themselves can truly be the voice of how the curriculum would be received by their demographic. Due to the nature of the capstone project process, it was not possible to involve any youth in the targeted age ranges in the review process, though I was mindful to have some of the qualified reviewers be at the upper limit of the youngest age range available (18-25) to get a closer sense of the youth voice represented.

Implications for Future Work

Though the targeted audience for this curriculum is young women ages 16-22 because of the mental health crisis facing this group and the tradition of women writers in the flash-length form, there is no specific evidence of what the efficacy of this project's approach on female-identified youth alone. Future researchers could consider piloting a similar curriculum for a group of youth of any gender to gather data on if the efficacy is different in any way.

Future implementation of programming focused on similar goals should include thorough surveying of both participants and facilitators to judge the efficacy of the stated curriculum goals. The body of scholarship available on the impact of using creative literature as a tool for

personal development and fostering connection for young women is growing. In the aftermath of the pandemic there is both a need and an opportunity to continue to expand this work.

In the sentiment of flash fiction writer Amber Sparks (2016), many women writers have gravitated to the flash-length form to turn the short space that they are given in a patriarchal society into powerful art that cannot be silenced. As the flash-length form is accessible and inviting to young writers, this is a tool that should be studied further in its efficacy regarding social justice education and developmental expression. As literature is a mechanism for solidarity, there is potential to use this as a particularly effective tool for young women writers and for other youth of marginalized or underrepresented identities. It is my goal to adjust the curriculum in the hopes of future implementation and to then assess the efficacy of these approaches on participants.

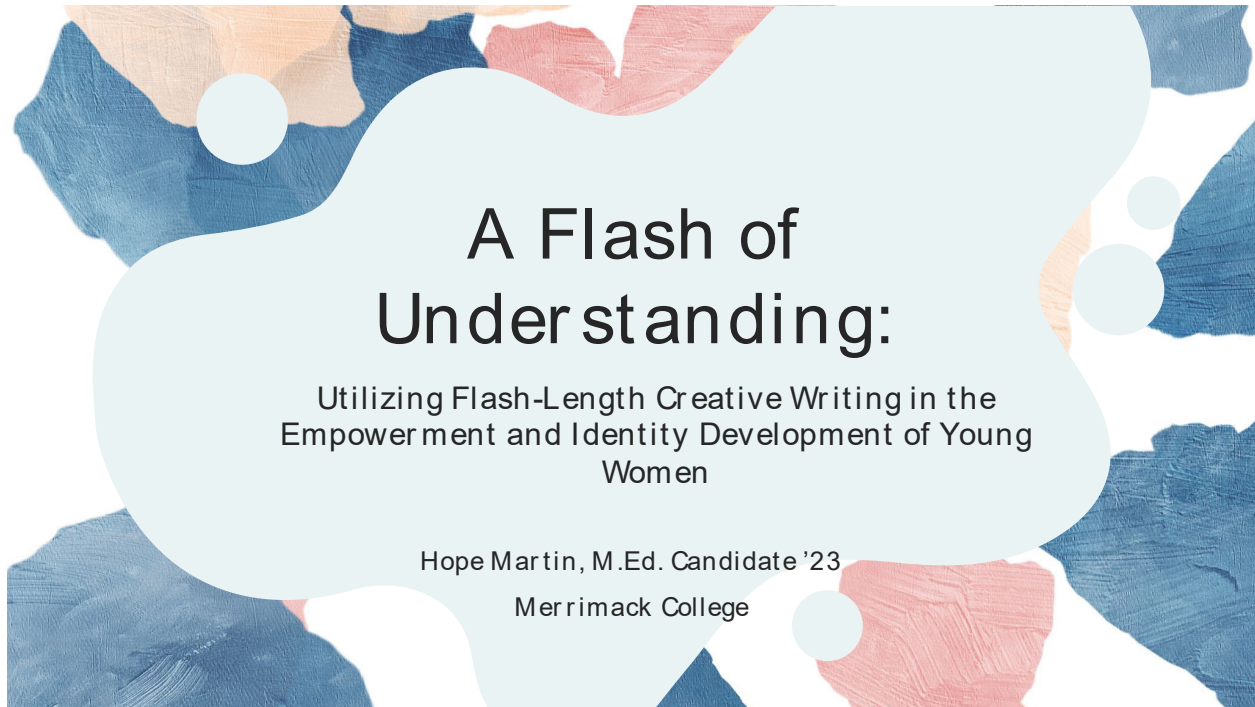
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Appendix A



A Flash of Understanding:

Utilizing Flash-Length Creative Writing in the Empowerment and Identity Development of Young Women

Hope Martin, M.Ed. Candidate '23
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Curriculum Review

- Theoretical Framework & Basis of Project
- Learning Goals of Curriculum
- Curriculum General Outline
- Sample Session
- Interviews



Why?

- 51.4% of young women (ages 18-24) experienced anxiety or depression symptoms in 2021-2022 according to the National Women's Law Center
- The mental health crisis among adolescents and young adults is exacerbated by systemic inequality and the COVID-19 pandemic
- The arts (including creative writing) are a tool that bring people together and reduce isolation
- Creative writing and reading can increase understanding of one's own experiences as well as others'—leading to understanding and empowerment when coming of age in an unjust world

Creative Youth Development (“CYD”)

- An off-shoot of the traditional Youth Development field that incorporates the arts
- Combines artistic skill development in equal importance with the personal growth of youth
- Goals include building a sense of belonging to a community

Learning Goals

1. Strengthen students' understanding and craft of flash-length creative writing, with the ability to experiment with different genres and styles
2. Deepen students' knowledge of and ability to reflect on key social justice concepts and theories
3. Build relationships among workshop peers, alleviating isolation faced by youth in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic

This curriculum is designed with older female-identified adolescents in mind, which could include older high school students (approximately ages 16 and up) or “traditional” college-aged youth.

Flash-Length Creative Writing

For the purposes of this curriculum, flash-length literature “flash” can be defined as :

- Fiction, creative nonfiction, poetry, or multi-genre work that is under 1,000 words\

Advantages of using flash may include:

- Shorter length of pieces makes them conducive to being listened to or read aloud by a group
- Length could be viewed as less intimidating by new writers
- Length allows for pieces to be read and critiqued by a small group in a shorter amount of time than longer prose or poetry

Curriculum Outline

- 10 Weekly Sessions, 90 Minutes
- Breakdown of Sessions:
 - Model Text (Read/Watch) [10 Minutes]
 - Social Justice Discussion [30 Minutes]
 - Writing Prompt & Writing Time [20 Minutes]
 - Small Group Workshop & Reflection (Critique/Support Circle) [30 Minutes]

Social Justice Topics:

- Feminism & Feminist Theory
- Anti-Racism
- LGBTQ+ Allyship & Identity
- Disability Justice
- Intersectionality

Sample Session

Topic: Intersectionality

(A theory created by Kimberlé Crenshaw that analyzes the ways social identities overlap to create experiences of privilege and/or oppression)

Model Text: “won’t you celebrate with me” by Lucille Clifton



Poetry Everywhere. (2009, March 26.) Poetry everywhere: “won’t you celebrate with me” by Lucille Clifton [Video]. (YouTube). https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XM7q_DUk5wU

Sample Session, Continued

Guiding Social Justice Discussion Questions:

- What are some examples of the social identities that Lucille Clifton embedded in her poem?
- In what ways was Lucille Clifton able to tell a story of life in such a short poem? What techniques could she have used?
- Are there any particular lines or phrases from the poem that could relate to experiences you have had in your life, or that stood out to you for other reasons?
- What are some of your identities that give you privilege (or give you advantages in society), and what are some that may cause you to experience oppression (or be mistreated in society)?

Writing Prompt:

Write a poem or flash-length prose piece that celebrates your unique set of identities and challenges you have overcome, utilizing the first-person point of view.

Workshop (Supportive Critique) Guidelines:

- The student whose piece is up for “workshop” is allowed to ask guiding questions and explain their goals for the piece, but will be encouraged to listen with an open mind to feedback and take notes
- Students should take care to provide critique on the craft of the writing itself, not on personal experiences
- Students should be encouraged to provide both positive feedback and critical feedback that is supportive in nature and meant to help the writer grow
- Students should be encouraged to connect feedback to social justice concepts, particularly those being discussed that week or in previous weeks
- Facilitator should take a non-hierarchical approach and value all students’ input equally in addition to their own

Interview

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Appendix B

Opening the Interview:

Thank you so much for taking the time to review my curriculum. I appreciate all your feedback and ask that you be as thorough and critical as possible for the sake of the project's development. Please know that your responses will be confidential and no identifying information will be shared in my capstone paper—you will be referred to as “Reviewer 1”, “Reviewer 2”, etc. with only the designation of your profession.

1. What are some of your initial reactions to the curriculum I shared with you?
2. How do you feel about the balance between creative writing education and social justice discussion?
 - a. (If reviewers indicate an uneven or less than ideal balance): What are some techniques, adjustments, or activities that can be added or taken away to address this?
3. Do you feel that the learning goals I shared with you can realistically be met by this curriculum?
 - a. (If reviewers indicate yes): Are there any elements of the curriculum that do this particularly well?
 - b. (If reviewers indicate no): What could be adjusted to fix that?

4. What do you see as some potential barriers to implementation, or shortcomings, with combining the methods described in the curriculum review of utilizing model texts, social justice discussions, writing prompts, and group workshops?
 - a. What are some strategies that could address these barriers?
 - b. If no barriers, how do you think youth will receive this curriculum?

5. What are some environments in which you could see this curriculum being implemented successfully?
 - a. (If suggestions are offered) Why would that be a good fit?
 - b. (If no suggestions are offered) What could be adjusted to make it ready for implementation?

6. Do you have any final thoughts for me about this curriculum or the overall project and its goals?

Demographic Questions:

What is your age?

18-25

26-40

41-55

56+

What is your experience level with creative writing education?

Minimal (1-2 Years)

Fair (3-5 Years)

Moderate (6-9 Years)

Extensive (10+ Years)

What is your experience level working with youth on issues of social justice or personal discovery?

Minimal (1-2 Years)

Fair (3-5 Years)

Moderate (6-9 Years)

Extensive (10+ Years)

End of Interview:

Thank you so much for coming to the review session and being willing to talk with me about this curriculum. As I review the results of these sessions, are you alright if I contact you with follow-up questions?

If you have any questions or concerns, please feel free to contact me via email. Thank you again for reviewing my capstone project.