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Beyer, Charlotte ORCID logoORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2701-5443> (2023) Using Creative Writing in English Literature Assessment: Diversity and Inclusion on an Undergraduate Crime Fiction Module. Clues: A Journal of Detection, 41 (2). pp. 107-110.

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EPrint URI: <https://eprints.glos.ac.uk/id/eprint/12886>

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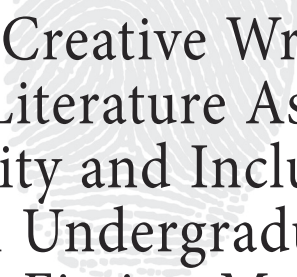
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Using Creative Writing in English Literature Assessment: Diversity and Inclusion on an Undergraduate Crime Fiction Module

Charlotte Beyer

Abstract. This essay reflects on the use of creative writing as assessment for English literature students on a crime fiction module. It examines the pedagogical aims and objectives underpinning the use of creative writing alongside conventional academic essay writing styles to engender more diverse and inclusive assessment forms.

In this essay, I offer a reflection on my use of creative writing as an original and critical lens in student assessment on a crime fiction module for second-year undergraduates. My experience of using this assessment demonstrates how crime fiction can provide a vibrant field for both curricular revitalization and assessment innovation. I furthermore consider the specific pedagogical aims and objectives underpinning my use of creative writing alongside more conventional academic essay writing.

Using creative writing as a lens for crime fiction research and assessment has yielded rich results on my crime fiction module. The module is situated within an English literature course and attracts a diverse student cohort, including students undertaking a joint English/English literature and creative writing degree. In recent years, I have changed the assessment format to become more inclusive, enabling students to draw on their creative as well as their analytical competencies in assignments (Beyer, “Centring” 60). In exploring uses of creative

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writing in assessment to enhance critical thinking, Hélène Edberg asks, “[c]an creative writing serve as a method to develop critical thinking?” Her response—and I agree with her evaluation—is that creative writing can “enhance students’ writing performances and their capacity to reflect and think critically” (Edberg v).

Creative writing is eminently adaptable as an analytical lens through which to evaluate key narrative and thematic drivers of crime fiction, enhancing student criticality and pedagogical innovation. My crime fiction module assessment includes the option to write a creative response to a module text accompanied by a critical reflection, alongside a range of more traditional academic assignment topics. This flexible creative option is available to all students on the module, not just creative writing students. Indeed, based on student assessments produced over two years using this assessment model, English literature students are equally as likely to do well and enjoy the challenge as creative writing students. This approach does not favor students from one academic discipline over others, nor do students see the creative assessment as the “easy” option. Using creative writing as an analytical lens is demanding and requires a structural and rigorous approach, just like an academic critical evaluation does.

My approach gives students the opportunity to explore different writing styles, including creative, critical, and reflective modes, as part of their assessment. Students often require practice at reflective writing because the personal perspective is conventionally discouraged in traditional academic discourse. Morris, Foster, and Kelly discuss the use of creative writing in assessment across a range of academic disciplines, and, echoing my findings, they state that reflective and creative writing presents a means of reclaiming personal agency for students (6). Burke argues, “[a]ssessment is a relation of power in higher education. It is not only about the criteria, the methods, or the grading systems; it is also about how we make sense of potential, capability, and belonging as assessors and assessed” (87). By offering literature students the opportunity to produce creative and reflective work, my crime fiction assessment strategy enhances student criticality, writing skills, and imaginative thinking.

The assessment writing process is supported by in-class assessment briefings that provide students with a detailed walk-through of the assessment brief, assignment topics, and advice on writing/expression and research. Furthermore, I give individual tutorial guidance for creative and academic assessments, providing feedback on essay plans or creative ideas, discussing approaches to a particular essay topic, and advising on specific texts to use. The students’ creative responses are wide-ranging in both thematic focus and stylistic variety. Some students focus on further developing a character or theme that is underrepresented in the original crime text. Others explore the backstory for a particular scene or passage, or write entirely new scenes or characters that not only extend but also reimagine the text forming the basis for their creative response. My pedagogical rationale for incorporating creative writing into crime fiction assessment is based on the need to make assessments more inclusive and extend students’ creative and critical idiom.

Text-based subjects, such as English literature, primarily focus on critical evaluation in academic writing. English literature assessments thus often concentrate on developing and harnessing specific skills to the detriment of others, neglecting competencies that employ students’ creativity and foster student diversity and inclusion. As argued elsewhere, creative writing merits a much more prominent role in crime fiction assessment as a mode that encourages personal expression, analytical engagement, and inclusivity (Beyer, “Investigating” 121). Crime fiction assessments thus model pedagogical innovation, empowering

English literature students to explore criticality and reflection through a creative writing lens.

Keywords: creative writing, crime fiction, diversity, English literature, pedagogy, assessment

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