Employing Animated Film as a Mentor Text: A Creative Writing Perspective

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Abstract

Early historical literature shows educators initially viewed film negatively, with concerns that it would lead to a decline in intellectual engagement. Conversely, compositionists embraced this medium rather than resisting its integration, expanding its definition as a form of scaffolding mentor text. Building on this positive potential, we introduce a point-of-view activity for aspiring ELL creative writers using animated film to facilitate students' authoring of short stories. To this end, we outline the rationale for using film as a mentor text and describe how the activity integrates into the scope and sequence of the creative writing curriculum. We then detail the point-of-view activity and provide a trajectory of activities for subsequent lessons. To explore the effectiveness of this approach, we employed a pseudo-experimental design, examining the short stories of undergraduate English language learners at a northern Taiwanese university. The results indicated that the students were able to meet the targeted initial elemental definition of short story creation (length) and incorporate first-person and third-person (limited, objective, omniscient) points of view in primary and secondary positions. We also discuss the study's limitations and potential applications of this activity (and other elements of short story creation) in various contexts. We hope this activity and the study's results will inform creative writing studies professionals in L2 contexts.

Key Words: creative writing, model texts, mentor texts, point of view, second language writing, film, short stories

Introduction

With the advent of the motion picture industry in the 1800s, numerous early educators posed doomsday-like concerns that film would heap evils upon society, leading to a decline in reading and a dumbing-down effect. Others adopted a more pragmatic or even optimistic view, explaining that films "are here to stay, and we shall have to make the best of them" (Neal, 1913, p. 658). That is, film's general ease of comprehension (Amaya-Anderson, 2008) increases students' inclination toward this medium over print (Gilbert, 1994), thereby making film viewing a common literacy practice (Baratta-Jones, 2008; Rahman et al., 2024), resulting in students taking the diversity of media for granted. Those in L1 writing studies expressed a similarly practical and positivist view, suggesting that while the amount of reading may decrease, film could potentially enhance cognitive abilities, thereby making us smarter (Johnson, 2006).

Early educators similarly posited film's educational virtues, expanding the definition of text by suggesting that film and writing share similarities as forms of composition (Johnson, 1980), acting as equal partners on a shared path (Costanzo, 1984, 1985) and further noting that film directors and writers frequently adapt literary texts, which facilitates students' perception of film as a model or mentor text for their creative writing narratives (Weatherbee, 2011), given their extensive exposure to it.

This perspective supports the notion that individuals who extensively engage with texts tend to develop stronger writing skills (Baker et al., 2024). Specifically, engagement enhances students' writing capabilities by expanding their grasp of textual models (Tieu et al., 2024) and imaginative frameworks (Flower & Hayes, 1980). Acknowledging that a writing class can also serve as a platform for extensive text engagement, the space becomes a place where aspiring writers can explore the creative processes of established authors (Ash et al., 2021; Baker, 2023; Bishop, 1990), including those involved in film adaptations.

Accepting that one goal of a creative writing course is to familiarize students with the elements of creative writing relevant to short stories, this can be achieved through a combination of viewing and creative writing, where students can draw on the creative elements shared in both genre to draft their own original and unique short stories (1,500 to 7,500 word short stories that comprise such elements within the scope and sequence of the creative writing curriculum), to include but, not limited to plot, setting, time, point of view, theme, character, description, tone and style, and dialogue (DeMaria, 2013).

The rationale for selecting a film adaptation (e.g., animated film) of a print text (e.g., historical fiction) is multifaceted. Firstly, animated film showcases traditional creative writing elements that students can draw upon. Moreover, English language learners (ELLs) often have limited exposure to English printed texts (Baker, 2021; Promsing et al., 2017), hindering their familiarity with the target second language (L2) (Baker, 2019; Krashen, 1982; Nguyen et al., 2024). Additionally, introducing a full-length text at the beginning of the term could take weeks, potentially leading some students to opt out. In contrast, a film

allows for immediate engagement with narrative structures common across films and texts, which can be directly applied in the writing classroom (Johnson, 2006). Finally, a film can be covered in just a few class sessions or assigned as a library excursion, providing a shared reference point for exploring creative writing elements during class and workshop discussions.

Regarding providing a good fit for students, selecting a film as the initial course medium acknowledges that many ELLs may not yet have the reading proficiency required for authentic English texts (Baker, 2020a), which can be demotivating (Baker, 2020b; Escobar-Acevedo et al., 2022). This approach ensures that all students can engage with traditional narrative elements, regardless of their English proficiency levels. Additionally, lower-level students can benefit from accommodations such as subtitles in their native languages and extended viewing periods, which may include repeated viewings (Mulyadi & Mutmainnah; Pérez & Rodgers, 2019)

Despite the advantages of using film as a mentor text in creative writing studies, this area remains largely understudied—particularly in terms of story length and narrative elements such as point of view, the perspectives from which a story is told (i.e., what the reader knows, sees, and experiences through the eyes of a narrator or character[s]) (Stegner, 2002) These are commonly classified as (a) first person, where a character narrates using "I," providing direct insight into his/her thoughts and emotions; (b) second person, where the narrator addresses the reader as "you," directly involving the reader in the narrative; or (c) third person, where an external narrator recounts the story in one of three ways, varying by scope.

The third person includes (a) ‘objective’ (also termed unintrusive, impersonal, camera, fly on the wall), presenting only observable actions and dialogue; (b) ‘limited’ (also termed subjective, restrictive), conveying the inner world of typically one character; and (c) ‘omniscient’ (also termed intrusive, all-knowing, God-like) providing access to the thoughts and experiences of multiple characters. We recognize that third-person perspectives" have been termed and categorized differently by various scholars, with some occasionally breaking them down into more or fewer distinct viewpoints (see Abrams & Harpham, 2015; Badick, 2015; Demaria, 2014; Earnshaw, 2014). However, for this study, we will employ the terms objective, limited, and omniscient.

To address this lacuna, we investigate students’ ability to meet the length criterion of short stories and incorporate points of view. Toward this, we have outlined an activity using an animated film (Disney’s Pocahontas) as a mentor text with a point-of-view activity and posed two research questions. The first examines whether students, after engaging the film, can write a text that meets one of the primary definition criteria for short stories (length), while the second investigates students' use of point of view:

RQ1: After engaging with film as a mentor text, did the students create short stories that exhibit the length criterion of the short story genre?

RQ2: After engaging with film as a mentor text, did the students demonstrate the use of point of view in their short stories?

The Point of View Activity's Place in the Course

To illustrate the value of using animated film as a mentor text in a creative writing course, we describe how Disney's animated film Pocahontas can be employed as a source text with a series of sequential activities, beginning with point of view and being built upon with other related element activities (Woodward, 2001) (plot, setting, time, point of view, theme, character, description, tone and style, and dialogue). The sequence of activities, including the Point of View Activity and those preceding (In-Class Viewing and Discussion of Creative Elements) and following it (Invention: Getting Students to Write, Future Class Sessions), may follow a schedule combining collaborative and independent approaches, which aim to gently scaffold students through incremental steps toward crafting their own stories.

In-Class Viewing and Discussion of Creative Elements

The Point of View Activity is a mid-course exercise that typically follows a group viewing of an animated film and a series of while- and post-viewing activities. The film can be watched over a few class sessions or assigned as a library excursion, providing a shared reference point for exploring creative writing elements during drafting and workshop discussions along a continuum (i.e., plot, setting, time, point of view, theme, character, description, tone, style, and dialogue. Following this, after the full viewing, the first few classes can focus on introductory viewing activities (Plot; Time and Setting) before moving on to point of view. To provide context, we summarize the two preceding activities—Plot, Time and Setting—below.

Plot

In the first class session, students explore conflict, suspense, development, and resolution through a three-step process. They first watch Pocahontas, followed by a lecture and discussion on traditional plot elements. In pairs or groups (depending on class size), they then retell the story, expanding and condensing sections in a diastolic-systolic fashion to create a well-balanced narrative (Davidson & Fraser, 2006). Each pair or group then presents its version to the class.

Time and Setting

In the second session, students imagine Pocahontas in different eras (past, present, and future) and locations, similar to Luhrmann's (1996) film adaptation of Romeo and Juliet. For this activity, each group randomly selects a time and setting card and collaborates to retell and/or rewrite the story accordingly,

which is later presented to the class. After completing these, the course can move on to the next activity in the sequence and scope: the Point of View Activity.

The Point of View Activity

The Point of View Activity explores first and third-person perspectives. It consists of four parts: (a) Illustration, (b) Collaborative Retelling and/or Writing, (c) Presentation, and (d) Post-discussion. This typically starts in the third class following the full viewing.

Step 1. Illustrative Scaffolding Activity

During the initial part of the class, the teacher presents a scaffolding activity: a short, straightforward, multi-character frame story using a storyboard (hard copy or virtual). The story could depict a lonely boy who discovers a baby bear and initially decides to keep it. However, upon observing the cub's deteriorating health and mother's despondency, he ultimately chooses to return it. Drawing on the storyboard, the instructor tells the story from three different perspectives (limited, objective, and omniscient) and then from multiple first-person perspectives (the boy, the cub, the sow, and the narrator).

Step 2. Collaborative Retelling and/or Writing

After demonstrating how to narrate a frame story from different perspectives (e.g., third and first person), students are organized into groups. Within these groups, they collaborate to retell the narrative of the film Pocahontas either from third-person perspectives (limited, objective, omniscient) or from the first-person viewpoint of one of four characters: (a) the main character and heroine, Pocahontas; (b) the colonialist, John Smith; (c) the warrior and Pocahontas's suitor, Kocoum; or (d) a personification of Pocahontas's pet raccoon, Meeko.

As the groups retell their versions, one group member acts as a scribe to record their story. In larger classes, additional character options like Powatan (the king), Willow (the spirit-tree grandmother), or Nakoma (Pocahontas's best friend) can be introduced.

Step 3. Presentation

Once the groups have created their versions of the story, the designated scribe from each group reads their story aloud to the class. Alternatively, each group member could recount the tale in a chain-story fashion. Another option is for a group scribe to record the retelling and then conduct a dramatic reading theatre-type performance, where the scribe narrates while group members act out the story before the class.

Step 4. Post Discussion

As students retell the story from different perspectives, several teaching and discussion opportunities present themselves: (a) the romantic entanglement involving Pocahontas, Kocoum, and John Smith; (b) Pocahontas's defiance against her father; and (c) Pocahontas's coming of age. Deeper themes may also emerge, including (a) Disney's feminist portrayal of Pocahontas, (b) misogyny, (c) arranged marriages, (d) racism, (e) world religions, (f) John Smith's colonial ambitions in what would become Virginia; (g) the resistance of 'others' (Pocahontas's father and Kocoum) against Smith's colonial aspirations; and (h) discrepancies between the film and the historical account of Pocahontas. The concept of personification can also be explored as Meeko the raccoon is personified in the students' retelling.

Invention: Getting Students to Write

Once the Point of View Activity is completed, we suggest an activity inspired by and adapted from Hurlbert (2013): Bringing out a collection of completed texts students have written in previous semesters. Examining these finished products gives students a real-world, task-based appreciation for their work, allowing them to discover intrinsic motivation for writing that extends beyond traditional external incentives, such as course requirements and grades. Expressivist topics may include those in which students examine themes from their own lives. Some of these may include, but are not limited to, (a) feelings of self-worth, (b) personal challenges, (c) family conflict, (d) friendship, (e) love, (f) losing and finding oneself, and (g) choosing a career path.

We recommend encouraging students to consider these exemplars and topics, emphasizing that they are merely examples, not prescriptive mandates, with which students can comfortably relate their own experiences (Kepe & Weagle, 2020). As such, students should be encouraged to consider these as springboards for their writing, where they can choose topics freely and propose them to the teacher (and optionally to the class) for feedback. They ought not to be limited to topics used in previous semesters or those proposed by the teacher, as predefined prompts can stifle creativity. Instead, these examples serve as inspiration to help students generate topics for their own narratives. We propose that this can be introduced in the third-class session, but it can be scheduled at any point when the teacher feels the students are ready to start writing their stories.

Future Class Sessions

This point-of-view activity illustrates third and first-person perspectives. Consequently, future class sessions can address other elements (theme, character, description, tone and style, and dialogue), as the film version is intended as both a cornerstone mentor and scaffolding text, and thus it can be cyclically revisited as students explore other elements (Baker et al., 2007). As the film serves as an impetus for writing and a

foundation text, discussions can also be revisited during the recursive stages of the creative writing course, including drafting, workshops, online feedback, and teacher-student conferences.

Methods

To explore the research questions, we employed a quasi-experimental single-group design at a Northern Taiwanese university with freshman ELL English majors in a one-semester course that met bi-weekly, two 50-minute periods each session. The students (N = 18), aged between 18 and 22, were predominantly female. The course was purposefully chosen, as it aimed to help students become familiar with the elements of creative writing while producing their own short stories. As part of the diagnostic survey, it was shown that the students had read few full-length stories in English and thus had not encountered elements particular to creative writing in such texts. The survey also revealed that they were minimally prepared as apprentice writers, having written few, if any, texts longer than a page in English.

Following the procedure illustrated earlier in this article, the class engaged in an in-class viewing and discussion of creative elements, followed by the steps of the aforementioned Point of View Activity: Step 1. Illustrative Scaffolding Activity, Step 2. Collaborative Retelling and/or Writing, Step 3. Presentation, Step 4. Post Discussion, Step 5. Invention: Getting Students to Write. Afterward, the students engaged in activities typical of a creative writing course, including weekly workshopping of stories and receiving peer and teacher feedback in class and virtually. However, we only addressed the course's final drafts to explore the research questions.

We strictly adhered to ethical considerations throughout the study, including obtaining informed consent, ensuring confidentiality, conducting a masked textual analysis, and using pseudonyms for the titles of students' final submissions.

Results

The results indicated that the participants were enrolled and attended the majority of the course. However, data for two students were not included due to their absence during the Point-of-View activity portion of the class. As such, sixteen valid stories were set for analysis. Once the submitted papers were formatted to the requisite 2.54 cm margins, 12-point font (Times New Roman), and 1.5 spacing, it was found that the texts ranged from 6 to 16 pages in length, with a mean of 10.11; standard deviation, 2.91 (excluding the cover page, table of contents, and illustrations, if applicable). Variance was affected by the amount of dialogue, page breaks for chapters, etc. The stories comprised an average of 3,220 words, ranging from 1,782 to 5760, with a standard deviation of 1,266, meeting the length range for short stories (RQ1) and indicating the stories were of sufficient length to be included in the study.

Regarding research question 2, the stories presented various points of view (Table 1). The majority of the stories included a third-person perspective as the primary pattern (limited and another third-person

perspective as the secondary pattern, omniscient or objective. Others included primarily third-person limited as the primary pattern, with some first-person narrative as a secondary pattern. Still others were composed in the first person as the primary pattern, with some employing third-person limited and omniscient perspectives as secondary patterns. There was also an instance of a story written entirely in the first person (multiple perspectives).

Table 1. Stories' Lengths and Points of View

	Title	Pages	Word count	Third Person			First Person
				Omniscient	Limited	Objective	
1	Journey to the Self	9	3,285	s	p		
2	Beyond the Lime Light: A Friend's Loyalty	9	3,006	s	p		
3	Love, Lights, and the Stage	12	2456	s	p		
4	I'm Not Stupid: Sam's Stand	7	2,300	s	p		
5	Mother and Child	10	2,018	s	p		
6	Love	6	1,917	s	p		
7	Secrets Beneath the Crystal Light	16	5,760		p	S	
8	Promises and Regret	9	4,453		p	S	
9	The Road to Redefinition	10	3,491		p	S	
10	Out	9	3,113		p	S	
11	The Tie Between Us	12	3,049		p	S	
12	The Price of Ambition	6	1,782		p	S	
13	A New Beginning: A New Family	8	3,738		p		s
14	The Garden of Lies	14	3,312		p		s
15	The Rainbow's Hidden Cost	9	3,037	s	p		s
16	Beyond the Mirror: Sisters and Reflections	11	2.941				e

Note. e = entirely, p = primary, s = secondary

Primarily Third-Person Limited with Some Omniscient Elements

Third-person limited was identified as a primary narrative pattern with some instances of omniscient narration appearing as a secondary pattern in six stories (Journey to the Self, Beyond the Lime Light: A Love, Lights, and the Stage, I'm Not Stupid: Sam's Stand, Mother and Child, Love). An example of this is illustrated in the story "I'm Not Stupid: Sam's Stand," which focuses on the protagonist, a quiet boy living in the shadow of his accomplished sister. Minor instances of third-person omniscient narration regarding other characters, such as his sister, are shown: "Lisa enjoyed the praise from others…. But she never told other people voluntarily that she had a brother…. She couldn't remember when she began to hate him." The third-person limited perspective focuses on the protagonist's feelings. After a timid stand against a shoplifter leads to bullying, he finds his voice and confidence, transforming his outlook: "Sam was

shocked by this scene, and he did not know how to react." The narrator also expounds on his inner dialogue: "One voice that usually spoke stopped him*: Don't bring troubles to yourself. You shouldn't care about these kinds of things.* But a second voice didn't give up: *Don't you want to change? Do you want to be looked down on forever? It's necessary to stop this wrongdoing*." Later, the all-knowing narrator foreshadows the protagonist's future: "Confidence was the key that unlocked Sam from the heavy and gloomy door. He became curious about everything. Positive thinking occupied his mind. Sam was not a boy who always said I have no idea anymore. He would tell you, 'I have my own idea, and I have my way.'"

Third-Person Limited as a Primary Pattern and Objective as the Secondary Pattern

A third-person perspective as the primary pattern (limited) with objective narration as the secondary pattern was also found in six stories (The Tie Between Us, Secrets Beneath the Crystal Light, The Price of Ambition, Promises and Regret, The Road to Redefinition, Out). An example from The Tie Between Us illustrates this—a story about two friends, Andrea and Flora, whose bond strains as Andrea's jealousy grows over Flora's newfound crush. A bitter fight seemingly ends their friendship, yet in the aftermath, both come to recognize the true value of their connection, leading to a heartfelt reconciliation. Here, the narrator sticks closely to one character's perspective (Andrea), revealing only her thoughts and experiences: "Andrea finally couldn't stand the weird atmosphere any longer and took the initiative. She asked Flora, 'I feel you've been a little strange recently, including the attitude you have toward me. I'm wondering what's happened to you. I am your best friend; maybe you can talk to me?" At other times, the narrator shifts to a more objective stance, reporting only observable actions and dialogue—for example, in Flora's response: "She moved awkwardly, 'I don't think so, Andrea. We still do everything together, don't we?"

Third-Person Limited as A Primary Pattern and First-Person Perspective as A Secondary Pattern

Other stories, two, featured a primary pattern of third-person perspective (limited) and a secondary pattern of first-person (A New Beginning: A New Family; The Garden of Lies). An example is shown in A New Beginning: A New Family, a story about a girl orphaned by sudden loss whose life takes a dramatic turn when she's adopted. It's a journey through grief, change, and the quiet hope of starting over. Here, a detached narrator reports the events without access to characters' inner thoughts or feelings ("It's 7:45 now, and bus 82 should already have come 15 minutes ago. It always comes on time—for the past 40 days—but not on this unusual day") while adding additional symbolic literary allusions: "More and more people gather at the hospital stop number 33, and time goes by…." A shift to the first person follows: "I don't know where I can go. So, I want to wait here, maybe my mother and my grandmother will turn into angels and come back to pick me up."

First Person as a Primary Pattern, with Some Third-Person Limited and Omniscient Patterns as Secondary Patterns

First-person narration is identified as the primary pattern in one story, with some use of third-person limited and omniscient as secondary patterns: The Wish's Hidden Cost, a story about a young girl who makes a secret wish and experiences a magical dream where everything feels unrealistically perfect. As the story unfolds through her perspective, she gradually learns the consequences of unchecked desire and comes to value her family above all else. Here, the dominant use of third-person limited narration allows readers to experience the world through the protagonist's eyes and thoughts. For example, we learn about her dream-wish: "In Debbie's mind, she secretly makes a wish. That night, she has a magical dream in which she is standing in a wonderous place where everything goes right." First-person also appears when the protagonist speaks directly from her perspective, using "I". "Wa, how beautiful that … is! This is my first time to see an LED rainbow." Finally, the story closes with a subtle shift to third-person omniscient, as the narrator steps back to offer a broader reflection on Debbie's growth: "She learned not to let her wants control her mind, or she'd lose something important, her family."

First Person (Multiple Perspectives)

One story, Beyond the Mirror: Sisters and Reflections, was found to be told predominantly from multiple first-person perspectives (directly through the eyes and minds of the main characters, Emily and Amy) who secretly admire one another's position in life. Emily battles low self-esteem, constantly comparing herself to her seemingly perfect older sister, Amy. Here, Emily exclaims: "I'm as pretty as Amy. I look at myself in the mirror. I'm pretty and popular, just like Amy," followed by inner thoughts: *Again, I am trying to persuade myself that I am good and rebuild my self-confidence….* Amy similarly faces troubles (feeling overlooked by her father after his marriage to a younger stepmother) and longs to reconnect with Emily, who seems to be growing distant: "When did we become like strangers?" Also looking into the mirror, Amy muses: "I'm dating a cute guy, but he's a junkie. Every time I am with him, I feel I can escape the ugly world. That's why I love him so much. That's my top secret. My father won't want to know."

Discussion and Conclusion

In this paper, we explored the historical literature surrounding the perceived negative impact of film on academia, including concerns about reduced reading and societal intellectual decline. Additionally, we discussed how compositionists have come to embrace film rather than resist its integration, thereby expanding their understanding of it as a form of text. Recognizing these perspectives, we introduced a point-of-view creative writing activity for aspiring ELL writers, using the animated film Walt Disney's Pocahontas as a mentor text to help students write short stories that incorporate elements of creative writing,

particularly point-of-view techniques. To investigate this aim, we explored whether, after engaging with the film, the students could write a text that meets one of the primary definition criteria for short stories (length) while incorporating point of view. The results demonstrated that, after engaging with the film, the students were able to effectively write at a length common to short stories and implement point of view, including first-person, third-person (omniscient, limited, and objective), in primary or secondary patterns.

As with any paper, this article has limitations. One area that warrants further exploration is how ELLs use animated films as a resource to explore other elements of creative writing in the curriculum's scope and sequence. Additionally, the comparative effectiveness of incorporating film at different stages of the writing process or in other creative writing genres has not been examined. Finally, since this was a single-group design, a study with one or multiple control and experimental groups could provide additional insights. We recommend that future research investigate these aspects further.

Inspired by a quote often attributed to Walt Disney ("We keep moving forward, opening new doors, and doing new things because we're curious, and curiosity keeps leading us down new paths"), this mentor text activity can be adapted to various L1 and ELL contexts with various films, aiming to acquaint students with creative writing elements and inspire their storytelling. And thus, in the tradition of writing studies, which supports one another and shares what we have learned (Baker, 2018; Harris, 1990), we hope the ideas presented here offer valuable applications for professionals in writing education. Additionally, given that this field remains largely underexplored and its pedagogical and theoretical frameworks are still evolving, we encourage our peers to collaborate with us in developing a comprehensive body of film-mentor text literature.

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