

Research Article:

Short Story Projects and Social Awareness: Students' Experiences with Gender and Social Inclusion in a Project-Based Learning Context

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ABSTRACT

Project-Based Learning (PjBL) is a teaching strategy that involves students in useful and relevant projects. This study investigates the students' perspectives, difficulties, and learning experiences prior to, during, and after following a short story project that integrates gender and social inclusion issues. The project involved 26 English Department students from one of the Malang state universities in Indonesia using a case study design. Self-reflection reports on Padlet and observations were used to gather data. The results show that students had a favourable opinion of the short story project and valued how it improved their behavioural, affective, and cognitive abilities. Students felt they had improved comprehension of story elements as they also promoted critical thinking, creativity, and empathy. However, they faced both internal (writer's block and poor self-confidence) and external problems (idea generation, creating engaging short story elements and time restrictions). The study suggests that incorporating PjBL with gender and social issues improves students' writing skills, increases their social awareness and enhances their learning engagement. The results also imply that PjBL fosters 21st-century abilities like critical thinking, teamwork, and communication. The findings highlight the importance of incorporating social issues into writing classes in order to improve students' academic and personal growth.

Keywords: Project-based learning, PjBL, short story writing, gender and social inclusion, critical thinking

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INTRODUCTION

Engaging in creative writing activity can sharpen the students' critical thinking skills. Critical thinking is one of the things that university lecturers are expected to stimulate in their students, which involves a process of more than just crafting narratives (Edberg, 2018). The foundation of critical thinking in education can be traced back to Benjamin Bloom's work with his theory of critical thinking skills. For many years, educators have utilised Bloom's taxonomy, which categorises cognitive processing skills in a hierarchical manner, as a framework for both instruction and the evaluation of higher-order thinking abilities (Evans, 2020). Among the many levels of thinking skills classified by Bloom (1956), critical thinking involves higher-order skills in which students are required to analyse, synthesise, and evaluate information, thereby deepening their cognitive abilities.

Bloom's taxonomy is aligned with the demands of 21st-century skills. Students in the 21st century should master the basic skills, also known as 6Cs, including communication, critical thinking, creativity, citizenship, collaboration, and connectivity (Artama et al., 2023). These skills equip students to learn how they succeed in the era of information, how to educate themselves, and how to share and make use of knowledge for the greater good of mankind. The above 6Cs, as demonstrated by various studies, are attainable using Project-based Learning (henceforth PjBL). Jupri et al. (2023) explore how the 6Cs can be implemented in literary writing courses in higher education through a novel adaptation approach. The findings suggest that integrating the 6Cs enhances students' literary writing skills and aligns with 21st-century learning objectives. Zhang and Ma (2023) investigate the effect of PjBL as a contrast to the traditional teaching method on students' learning outcomes and thinking skills. The result shows PBL enhances academic achievement, affective attitudes, and thinking skills, aligning with the 6Cs framework. The studies suggest that PjBL is an instructional teaching and learning approach that accommodates the 21st-century skills.

This learning model applies the 6Cs as they had to work in a group with a shared responsibility to think critically and solve problems. Crafting a good piece of narrative writing is a challenge for student-writers. Research on writing has shown that topic selection and writing strategy can affect students' ability to write. When students struggle to choose a topic, they may face writer's block, lack of motivation, or difficulty developing ideas. The cognitive writing process proposed by Flower and Hayes (1981) highlights that topic selection is foundational to successful writing. A well-defined topic helps writers generate ideas, set meaningful goals, and maintain coherence, while a weak or unclear topic can lead to writing difficulties such as lack of focus, poor organisation, and excessive revision. In the Indonesian EFL context, Toba et al. (2019) investigated the writing abilities. They found that students have problems in areas such as content, organisation, vocabulary, grammar, and mechanics. The researchers also found that limited knowledge of writing aspects and specific essay types contributed to these issues. Additionally, personal factors like lack of writing practice, writing anxiety, and low motivation were significant. These findings suggest that difficulties in topic selection may stem from limited knowledge and personal factors, leading to challenges in generating and organising content. The second challenge that may arise in writing is writer's block. Writer's block is a well-documented challenge among student writers, affecting their ability to produce written work effectively (Oliver, 1982; Wimmersberg, 2015; Sasmita & Setyowati, 2021). It can manifest as difficulty in starting a writing task, generating ideas, or maintaining the flow of writing. Research

indicates that both internal (self-confidence, writing motivation, writing pressure, fear of making mistakes and lack of knowledge) and external factors (such as teaching strategies and classroom atmosphere) contribute to this phenomenon.

Taken into the context of creative writing, the students practice their analytical skills development. These skills are practised when students create stories or poems in which they must construct coherent plots, develop characters, and establish settings (Edberg, 2018). This necessitates organising thoughts logically and understanding cause-and-effect relationships, which are fundamental aspects of critical thinking. Studies have found that creative writing can predict students' critical thinking (Madjid et al., 2019; Youssif et al., 2021).

In creative writing, the students also practice their problem-solving skills through problem identification within the stories and devise creative solutions which promote innovative thinking. If writing itself is seen as a form of creative problem-solving (Johnson & Sieben, 2016), creative writing gives room to student-writers to practice this skill. This relates to Starko's (1989) study that examines the techniques used to generate and select topics for creative writing, highlighting the role of problem-finding in the creative process. He found that the students' ability to identify and define problems can enhance creative thinking and writing skills. PjBL requires students to be involved in a project to produce a product through scientific steps in order to achieve attitude, knowledge, and skills (Rachmajanti et al., 2020). A project work leads to mirroring real-life situations by providing tasks to work on together as it gives opportunities to the students to work cooperatively with the group to complete the project task (Mali, 2016).

Dewey first proposed the project-based method with his "learning by doing" theory (Dewey, 1916, p. 192). Later, Kilpatrick expanded on Dewey's theories in 1918 (Retter, 2018). After that, the concepts of project-based learning are expanded by Blumenfeld et al. (1991) through their discussion of the PjBL process, including motivation and self-regulation. Larmer et al. (2015) went on to refine the project-based technique into Gold Standard PBL. There are several steps in project-based learning implementation (Larmer et al., 2015; Rachmajanti et al., 2020). PjBL always starts with an inquiry question/a problem, which is later determined into a project. In a school context, the project should be linear with a particular basic competence. The next step is to gain much information about the project and how it should be done. Next is the project design. In this stage, the students design the project and the timeline to execute the project. The teacher serves as a facilitator who gives suggestions to the process of project completion. The next step is giving and receiving feedback from peers and teachers. The next step is to report the result of the project or to make it public. The reflection session may come during the project (Larmer et al., 2015) or after the project is completed (Rachmajanti et al., 2020).

With so many social issues and gender inequalities people face nowadays, it is becoming increasingly important to incorporate social inclusion and gender issues into classroom instruction. Bringing the outside world into the classroom will make students think critically to solve problems. Participating in solving social problems and gender inequality issues necessitates critical thinking abilities. According to Werner and Bleich (2017), decision-making and action-taking abilities cannot be isolated from critical thinking capabilities. Furthermore, Geng (2014) adds that the nature of critical thinking abilities involves making judgments, arguing, questioning, analysing information, figuring out solutions, disposition, and meta-cognition skills. In general, university students are expected to have the capability

to analyse information critically, such as evaluating, inferring, and making conclusions on specific subjects (Rezaee & Mubarak, 2018). And writing is one technique to see how critical one's thoughts are. According to Dunn and Smith (2009), the act of expressing one's thoughts through writing is an example of critical thinking. It is all because writing requires the integration and execution of numerous skills, such as reasoning, planning and organising, as well as choosing proper punctuation and grammatical norms. As a result, writing is commonly seen as a means for developing critical thinking skills (Quitadamo & Kurtz, 2007).

In the Indonesian context, most research on the use of PjBL for teaching writing has shown that PjBL helps students to write better and sharpen their creativity as well as teamwork skills. Some research focuses on the use of PjBL for creative writing in story-making. Syarifah and Emiliasari (2019) investigated how PjBL develop students' ability and creativity in narrative text as well as their views on PjBL implementation in a private university in Majalengka, West Java, Indonesia. The project implemented in the classroom was to create a storybook. The results reveal that project-based learning can help students improve their abilities and creativity in a variety of ways when writing narrative text, such as understanding the topic, understanding the characteristics of the narrative genre, e.g., its social functions, text structure, and language features. The result also reveals that students favour PjBL since it taught them communication, teamwork, and collaboration. Their study suggests that PjBL is an effective approach to improve the students' abilities and creativity in writing narrative texts as it is also beneficial to promote interpersonal competencies. Zubaidi et al. (2023) investigated the students' perception on the use of PjBL integrated with Wattpad for creative writing. They used a case study design by employing observation and questionnaires to collect the data. The result shows that most students have a positive attitude toward the use of PjBL and Wattpad to finish their creative writing task. They further state that PjBL promoted students' autonomous learning.

In the Indonesian context, research also shows that PjBL is more effective than the direct method or the conventional method for teaching writing, and how it relates to creativity. Soffiany and Purbani (2020) investigated the use of PjBL for teaching writing for the 7th-grade students. The study found three things. Firstly, they found out that PjBL was more effective than the direct method for teaching writing. Secondly, they also found that students with more creativity had better writing achievement than those who did not. And finally, they also found out the interaction between teaching methods and students' creativity. The result of their research implies that the effectiveness of the method on the students' writing skills depends on the students' level of creativity. Kartika (2020) also found that two significant advantages of the application of PjBL. Firstly, it provided considerable academic benefits by improving students' critical reading skills and providing a more comprehensive knowledge of the topic. And secondly, there was also the non-academic advantage, which includes improved teamwork, creativity, and interpersonal abilities.

Even though previous research has explored a wide area of PjBL for writing classes in the foreign language context, not much is dedicated to investigating the students' perceptions of the implementation of PjBL for creative writing in terms of the students' experiences before, during and after the implementation of the project. Not much research is also dedicated to investigating the problems and benefits of PjBL from the students' point of view. Therefore, the research questions of the present study are formulated as follows.

1. What were the students' views on the implementation of the short story project using gender and social inclusion issues?
2. What did the students learn before, during, and after the short story project using gender and social inclusion issues?
3. What were the problems in the implementation of the short story project using gender and social inclusion issues?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Project-Based Learning

PjBL is a learning model in which students and the learning process are arranged around projects (Thomas, 2000). Students in this learning model work in groups and are assigned a problem to which they must discover a solution. The problem should be real, as PjBL involves real-life issues or challenges where solutions might potentially be executed (Thomas, 2000). Although students in PjBL work in groups, their performance is evaluated individually based on the quality, content, and delivery of the product, as well as their participation during the process of creating it (Goodman & Stivers, 2010).

PjBL learning model is supported by John Dewey's theory of experiential learning (Dewey, 1916). His theory and PjBL are deeply aligned because both emphasise learning through experience, active engagement, and reflection. Dewey believed that education should be grounded in real-world experiences, where learners actively participate in the process and reflect on their learning. His idea of "school as a social laboratory" has inspired educators and influenced educational policy makers (Maida, 2011).

Some key ideas of Dewey's ideas in support PjBL are learning by doing, active participation, reflective thinking, connection to real-world problems, collaboration and critical thinking skills. Dewey's famous principle "learning by doing" (Dewey, 1916, p. 192) aligns with PjBL's, which emphasise students' active engagement in projects. In PjBL, students create real-world projects that require problem-solving, creativity, collaboration, and critical thinking. Dewey argued that learning is most effective when students are involved in activities that are relevant to them (Dewey, 1938), similar to how PjBL encourages real-world tasks. Dewey also believed that learning is achieved best when it is meaningful and connects to the students' lives and the world around them (Dewey, 1916; 1938). Furthermore, Dewey stressed the importance of reflective thinking (Das & Banerjee, 2023), in which students need to take careful consideration of their learning experiences. In PjBL, reflection is a continuous process in which the work, the challenges and the successes are assessed from time to time to get better results. Dewey also recognised the social aspect of learning, believing that it grows in collaborative environments (Das & Banerjee, 2023). PjBL fosters collaboration among students, teachers, and sometimes even external experts or community members, aligning with Dewey's (1938) belief that learning is a social activity. Finally, Dewey suggested that learning should go beyond memorisation and should promote critical thinking and problem-solving skills (Dewey, 1938). In PjBL, students engage in inquiry-based learning, questioning, hypothesising, testing, and revising their ideas. As a result, not only does this type of learning model assist students in acquiring theory, but it also assists students in improving their critical thinking and creativity.

PjBL is an inquiry-based method of instruction that involves learners in the creation of knowledge by assigning meaningful tasks and requiring them to create real-world results (Brundiers & Wiek, 2013; Krajcik & Shin, 2014). The process of creating knowledge is reflected in a creative writing activity where students create the knowledge of how to write the story and acquire the knowledge of the intrinsic elements of the story. In this study, project-based learning is also meaningful as students write stories about real life or stories of people in their surroundings. The result of their story writing is the e-magazine, which is relatable to the spirit of project-based learning.

Krajcik and Shin (2014) identified six characteristics of PjBL: a driving inquiry, a focus on objectives for learning, involvement in learning activities, student cooperation, the use of supporting technology, and the creation of real-world products. The development of products that answer authentic problems is the most important element that distinguishes PjBL from other student-centred methods of instruction, such as problem-based learning (Blumenfeld et al., 1991; Helle et al., 2006). In the process of knowledge integration, application, and construction, learners must collaborate to develop solutions to actual problems. In most cases, teachers and other community members serve as facilitators, providing feedback and assistance to students. These six characteristics are integral in framing the teaching and learning aspects of this study. Scholars like Guo et al. (2020), Lai (2021) and Markula and Aksela (2022) have used these characteristics in examining how PjBL was implemented in the classroom.

Helle et al. (2006) examined both PjBL practice and its impact on student learning. In terms of practice, the researchers discovered that most of the studies examined were limited to course descriptions in terms of course dimension, instructor criteria, and team size. In terms of impact, the research discovered that a handful of studies explored the impact of PjBL on student learning in terms of either cognitive (e.g., knowledge) or affective (e.g., motivation). Ralph (2016) investigated 14 studies that used PjBL in STEM teaching. PjBL was found to improve the development of both learners' knowledge and abilities. Students also thought that PjBL encouraged group participation and negotiation, even though some of them did not.

Gender and Social Issues

Presenting and incorporating gender and social issues into the classroom can encourage students' critical thinking, equity, and inclusivity. Writing can become a way to critically discuss and express thoughts and opinions on these subjects. Research suggests that incorporating gender and social issues in writing tasks enhances students' social awareness and strengthens their ability to think critically as reflected in the writing.

Recent studies provide insights into how these integrations impact student development. Johnson (2021) has explored a curriculum project that integrates identity exploration through creative writing using social justice issues in an English Language Arts (ELA) classroom. Johnson (2021) found that incorporating social justice themes into creative writing curricula allows students to explore complex social issues and develop their critical thinking and personal identities. Mayor and Pollack (2022) also examine how creative writing during the COVID-19 pandemic can function as a decolonising intersectional feminist method, fostering critical self-reflection and awareness of social justice issues. A newer study by Kumlu (2024) highlights the role of critical consciousness in understanding

social realities affecting education. The research suggests that incorporating gender issues in the teaching and learning process enables pre-service teachers to develop critical thinking skills necessary for establishing inclusive learning environments. The studies highlight the role of creative writing as a powerful tool for promoting critical thinking and fostering a deeper understanding of diverse perspectives in the context of gender and social issues.

METHODOLOGY

This study used a case study design to explore the participants' perceptions on the short story project for their creative writing class (Stake, 1995). The participants of the study were 29 students of English Language Education at one of the state universities in Malang. The researchers selected the student participants because they had conducted projects using the PjBL model and had taken a Creative Writing course. Prior to data collection, the students were willing to participate in the research by agreeing to the research consent sent to Google Form. The instruments used were documentation of students' self-reflections in Padlet during and after using PjBL for their creative writing project. The researchers also used observation during the implementation of PjBL in the classroom and outside the classroom context. In the self-reflection, the students were asked to write their overall opinion about the creative writing project, what they learned before, during, and after the project completion, and the challenges or problems they faced. The data was collected in one month.

Research Context

During the course, the students were required to make a short story project under the theme of social inclusion and gender issues. To create the story, the students should work in a small group to interview people, friends outside their circle, or family members who have experienced social prejudice, gender stereotypes or inequality, social exclusion such as bullying (verbal or physical/social media or real life), or other similar matters. With the group member, they had to discuss which part of the life stories of their interviewee was worth retelling as a story. The students were given a Padlet link to write the progress report for the project. Then, individually, each member of the group created a story framework by using imaginative characters, plot, and setting and posted their story on Padlet. The students then made a draft of their story. As suggested by Freestone (2009), drafting, redrafting and supervised feedback in writing can improve the students' writing. In this study, after making the first draft, the students and the lecturer gave comments on other students' work. After giving and receiving feedback, students revised the story and posted it back on the Padlet. Revision is an important component of the writing process (Rijlaarsdam et al., 2004). At the end of the project, the students were asked to write a self-reflection about their project and their experience. The students' short stories were selected by the lecturer and the researchers to be published in an anthology of short stories called 'Life Stories'. By the time this paper is written, the anthology will have already been published by Aqilian Publika. The title of the book is "*LIFE STORIES; Antologi Cerpen Gender & Inklusi Sosial*" and is available in the market through print on order.

DATA ANALYSIS

The researchers used thematic analysis to analyse the data. Thematic analysis is a qualitative data analysis procedure that entails looking through the data set to discover, analyse, and identify patterns that arise (Braun & Clarke, 2006). It is an active reflexive process in which the researcher's subjective experience takes an important part in the meaning-making of the data. The researchers employed Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase theme analysis framework, which includes data familiarisation, codes generation, theme searching, themes review, defining and analysing, and finally writing up. The researchers are mainly concerned with addressing the research questions. Therefore, the researchers used manual coding to identify and code the specific part of the data. The researchers were in search of positive/negative nuance of vocabulary that showed a positive or negative attitude toward the implementation of PjBL. The researchers also looked for information on what the students learned, and explicit words or phrases that reflected their difficulties during the implementation of PjBL. The key words sought were "like", "happy", "enjoy", "dislike", "hate", "learned", "problems" and "difficulties". Therefore, the researchers developed a simple coding system that showed the themes. The positive view was coded as *Pos/data 1*; meanwhile, the negative view was coded as *Neg/data 1*. Things that students learned in the implementation of PjBL were coded *Learned/data 2*, while the problems or difficulties were coded as *Prob/diff/data 3*. The students' identity was also coded by using their initials. All the data was analysed qualitatively. However, to make the data easily read and interpreted, the researchers also used percentages to find out the overall description of the data.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Views of Creative Writing Project

The results show that, especially when considering PjBL, the majority of students had a favourable opinion of the creative writing project. Despite the difficulties in coming up with ideas and organising a coherent story, the qualitative data demonstrates that students valued the chance to participate in storytelling. Many of them indicated excitement, interest, and enjoyment in creating short stories.

Positive experiences

The students said that the project was pleasing, interesting, and fun. They valued the systematic approach to learning storytelling and were delighted to have a hands-on experience in creative writing. In the end, some students who were first hesitant or had trouble coming up with ideas found the project rewarding (Data 1.1, 1.2, 1.3, 1.4, 1.5).

I feel happy and excited because I quite like writing stories. Apart from that, with this activity I can learn new things and try to apply them. (Data 1.1/AdivHA/Pos/1)

Honestly, I don't expect that this project will appear. So, I really enjoy the short story making. I like to write short stories, but I don't like running out of inspiration. Overall, that was funfreakingtastic. (Data 1.2/RafAF/Pos/1)

The first time I wrote a short story, I felt interested and confident that I could write it easily. However, the fact is that writing a short story requires a lot of time and creative ideas. (Data 1.3/NabDW/Pos/1)

I am very happy with this project (Data 1.4/DyaASKA/Pos/1)

I like this project; I don't have a reason to dislike it. (Data 1.5/RafAF/Pos/1)

Mixed feelings

Some students had mixed feelings. In the beginning, they had no idea how to do the project or what to write in it. In the end, the students felt some kind of achievement for being able to finish the project and had a feeling of enhanced writing skill. Some of them said that writing a short story was easy, yet it turned out to be difficult. However, some of them said that they did not know how to write a story in the first place. Yet, after joining the project, they knew how to write a simple story (see data 2.1).

Before I joined this short story project, I thought that writing short stories was easy and could be done by everyone. And after I wrote this short story, it turned out that my thoughts were wrong. Writing short stories is one of the most difficult parts of writing because we have to be able to connect the beginning, conflict, and ending of the story. (Data 2.1/NabDW/Learned/2b)

The result of the thematic analysis shows that almost all of the students liked the short story writing project, and only three students reported disliking the project. The result of this research is similar to that of Kartika (2020), in which, in her study, students show a positive perception of the application of PjBL. The result of the present study also supports Alyani and Ratmanida (2021), in which students in their research show a positive view on the implementation of PjBL. The students in their research stated that PjBL made them more active, had more communication and collaboration skills and enabled them to have more motivation to learn English.

Aspects Learned from the Project

Story structure and elements

Many students highlighted their improved understanding of narrative structures, including plot development, character creation, setting, and atmosphere (see Data 2.1, 2.2, 2.3, 2.4, 2.5).

I learn a lot of things in writing something. Learn how this story can be good with a coherent structure or elements. I am grateful for the knowledge that has been given to me and us. Before participating in this project, I found writing something difficult because I didn't know the proper structure and elements at the time. However, after participating in this project, it turned out that we were taught good structure and elements in writing. (Data 2.2/TasNS/Learned/2)

I learned how to write an interesting short story during this project. I can understand what elements are in a short story, starting from the plot, characters, setting, and atmosphere in the short story, so that readers can be interested in reading my short story. This project can improve my writing skills. In addition, to make a short story, it is necessary to choose diction that can make the story seem as if it really happened. (Data 2.3/NabDW/Learned/2-a)

I learned about how to start writing stories properly and how to convey the ideas we have. It helps me to express the ideas that I have to write down; besides, it helps me understand how to start when I run out of ideas. I became able to write on various topics and understand the correct way of writing. (Data 2.4/AHA/Learned/2).

I learned how to make a good short story, such as knowing the plot, characters, characterisations, atmosphere, etc. I need to write the “dramatic” words or sentences because this is a short story. Of course, with the right diction, the story will not be boring. (Data 2.5/RafAF/Learned/2).

In the self-reflections, the students compared what they learned before, during, and after the project. The data shows that students learned how to start and how to end a story, how to put the ideas on paper, how to write a story and what important elements make a story engaging. The data also show that the project helped students improve their writing abilities. They initially struggled with writing because they had limited knowledge about the story elements and organisation. But after working on the project, students gained sufficient knowledge of important literary elements (e.g., plot, characters, setting, and atmosphere), organisation and how to make it coherent. They also realised the important role of proper use of structure and diction in creating a realistic and engaging story. Even though short story and narrative text share almost similar characteristics, the students learned much more from the project, like how to start the story, how to develop the story by selecting appropriate plot, how to create and develop characters for the story, how to create setting, and to choose dictions that represents events, feelings, and atmosphere of the story.

Creative thinking and expression

The students also learned how to think critically and creatively to create a story. Students' critical and creative thinking skills improved as a result of the project, which also helped them develop their ability to communicate thoughts in an engaging way (see Data 2.6, 2.7, 2.8, 2.9).

What I like about this project is that there are many things that I can take, such as the way of writing, and so on. Apart from that, this also helps me to be more creative in writing. (Data 2.6/AHA/Learned/3)

This project helps me become more creative in writing something. At first, I felt less creative and had difficulty starting to write something, but the lecturer gave me the knowledge. (Data 2.7/TasNS/Learned/2)

Before I joined this project, I actually felt confused because I didn't know how to write the storyline well. And after I try to write the short story, I feel like writing my own story, and I try to believe in myself (that I can do it). (Data 2.8/LutHS/Learned/2b)

I also learn how to write my messy ideas into a short piece of writing. (Data 2.9/AlvRF/Learned/2b)

The qualitative data show that the students learned a lot about writing from this project, especially how to organise their thoughts and develop their creativity. Many students first experienced difficulties, like trouble getting started, anxiety, and uncertainty over plot

structure. But with practice and structured guidance, students improved their ability to express their ideas, create coherent stories, and communicate their creativity. Their writing abilities and storytelling confidence were enhanced by this experience, which also made the process more pleasurable and meaningful.

Time management and self-discipline

Aside from learning the short story structure and its elements, some students also learned time management skills. Some students learned to appreciate how crucial it is to efficiently manage their time, particularly when working under pressure (see Data 2.10, 2.11).

I learned that I could write under pressure. It may be hard to write about the first word, but just write whatever you have inside your brain and let them do the work—time management. I already knew that I work better when the time is chasing, but I didn't know writing could be this fun and intriguing. I felt like this helps me so much in managing time because if there's a due date, I could prevent being a procrastinator. (Data 2.10/AlvRF/Learned/2)

Before joining The Short Story Project, we may have had limited exposure to the craft of short story writing. But after joining the project, we can gain access to other writers who can offer support, feedback, and inspiration to improve our skills. (Data 2.11/ApfWK/2)

Based on the study findings, the short story project influenced the students' ability to manage their time and write. They found that setting deadlines helped them overcome laziness and that they could write well under pressure. They also discovered that writing could be an interesting activity. Additionally, the project gave the students the chance to make connections with other writers who could offer encouragement, criticism, and support. All things considered, this experience makes them more confident with their own writing skills as well as their storytelling creativity and self-discipline.

Collaboration and exposure to diverse perspectives

Students also had wider experiences and connections to meet new people who had more knowledge on story writing. They had the opportunity to communicate, share ideas, and get inspiration from other writers, people of their surroundings and peers throughout the project (see Data 2.12, 2.13, 2.14).

I learn that there are still people who discriminate against each other. (Data 2.12/AlvR/Learned/2)

I think it's still important as a human being to feel connected with others and to be part of society. It also helps us to learn from people from different backgrounds, different cultures and diversities and values them as an equal. It means that everyone gets involved and no one feels left out. I learn that some people still discriminate by gender. (Data 2.13/NurIM/Learned/2)

We can help people by sharing our stories. (Data 2.14/ApsWK/Learned/2)

Other interesting data that emerged from the self-reflection portfolio was the awareness and being critical of what happens in their surroundings. The students wrote that they were surprised that discrimination still occurred in society, either because of the difference in social status or because of gender stereotypes. Because of that, they felt the need to voice the discrimination by sharing their stories with other people.

Broader social awareness and personal growth

Aside from learning the material, which was about writing a short story, students also learned some affective factors, such as being grateful for what they had. Feeling gratitude is a key to positive emotion (Lianov, 2021). Gratitude is the feeling of thankfulness as a response to what has been given. Passmore and Oades (2016) state that having the feeling of gratitude enables someone to focus on the positive elements in their life, and to maintain healthy relationships with others, which results in hope, satisfaction and positive behaviours towards other people. Taken into this context, the students were found to be feeling grateful for what they had in life as they learned that many people were not so fortunate. Students' increased awareness of social concerns, specifically discrimination, gender stereotypes, and social exclusion, was one important finding from the self-reflection portfolios. While some students were surprised to learn how common discrimination is, others felt inclined to share stories that raise awareness and encourage inclusivity (see Data 2.15, 2.16).

From this activity, I learned many things. One of them is that I must be grateful for every condition I have because not all people feel what I feel now. Sometimes, we must look down to be always grateful for what we have now. (Data 2.15/AishAL/Learned/2)

To be honest, I got a lot of things from this activity, about how social life is and how to fight for life. Besides that, I also learned about the need to be grateful for whatever blessings we have. Because it could be something that we think is normal, it will be very meaningful to others. And also about humanity, that we must have a sense of humanity and concern for one another. About how to appreciate and respect each other without having to distinguish what class they are. (Data 2.16/AdvHA/Learned/2)

The data from the self-reflection shows that the students had a lot to learn from the short story project. The students learned the cognitive element, the affective element, and the soft skills. They did not only learn about the knowledge of writing only (the cognitive element), but also how to apply the knowledge in practice. The students also learned to apply and sharpen the soft skills needed in real-life contexts, such as communication, creativity, networking, time management skills, and critical thinking skills.

The application of PjBL for creative writing has supported the 21st-century skills. As stated by Artama et al. (2023), PjBL fits with the 21st-century demands in which students face real-life challenges and are required to work in teams to solve them. Guo et al. (2020) further state that the outcomes of PjBLs are the cognitive outcomes, which include students' understanding of the subject matter, conceptual comprehension, and course achievement. Other PjBL outcomes as reported by Guo et al. (2020) are the affective results, which are divided into two categories: student evaluations of what they learnt and how they viewed the learning experiences. The affective outcomes as reported in the Guo et al. (2020) in the extensive literature studies are attitude, motivation and self-efficacy to the subject.

Furthermore, Guo et al. (2020) also reported that the behavioural outcome on the implementation of PjBL covered the hard skills and the soft skills. One of the examples of the hard skills mentioned is the writing skill. Meanwhile, the soft skills reported in their library research were problem-solving skills, collaborative skills, and critical thinking skills. The result of this research supports Guo et al.'s (2020) analysis on the benefits of PjBL in terms of the cognitive, affective, and behavioural elements. Some students also mentioned feeling more appreciative and empathetic, realising all the good things they had, and growing in their understanding of social justice and human diversity. This result is consistent with a study that highlights the psychological and emotional benefits of storytelling and reflection in the classroom (Puspitoningrum et al., 2024).

The data from the self-reflection and documentation suggest that the students' empathy may trigger their creativity in the creative writing project. In creative writing, empathy is essential for fostering creativity. Through cultivating an extensive understanding of different perspectives and feelings, writers can produce more genuine and appealing stories. Research has demonstrated a positive relationship between daily creativity and domain-specific creative activities and cognitive empathy, which is the ability to understand another person's thoughts and feelings (Tie et al., 2024). They further state that very emphatic individuals are more likely to see issues from multiple perspectives, which may improve their creative outcome.

Literary creation undeniably has a reciprocal relationship with empathy. The study of literary creation and empathy has been conducted by Keen (2007). The findings demonstrated that reading fiction helps develop empathy parts in the brain to comprehend the thoughts and feelings of others. A similar study was also conducted by Mar et al. (2008). Their study showed a relationship between reading fiction and increasing empathy and social skills. To create a living and realistic character, the writer must be able to understand different emotions, motivations, and perspectives. Through his work, the writer tries to understand the characters in the story (Baron-Cohen et al., 1985). By showing empathy, a writer can place himself in the shoes of his characters, even if they have different experiences, backgrounds, or beliefs. It is possible for the story writer to undergo cognitive and emotional changes that can enhance empathy (Gerrig, 1993). On the other hand, creative writing can increase comprehension of human behaviour. Writers tell stories about a variety of people's experiences and the meanings of life through their artistic creations. The statement that creative writing is a way to explore emotions is not hyperbole.

In creative writing, authors frequently imagine other people's emotions or examine their own. This enhances emotional insight, increases sensitivity to other people's experiences, and deepens comprehension of the complexity of human traits. Batson (1991) and Nussbaum (2010) emphasise that empathy for others can motivate pro-social actions. In conclusion, the creative writing project helped students improve their critical thinking, emotional intelligence, and storytelling skills. Even if some students had problems at first, the majority eventually realised how beneficial disciplined writing practice was. The project promoted social awareness, gratitude, and personal development in addition to academic study.

Problems

The external problems

The students said that they had some problems with the short story writing. As summarised from the data, the students had seven problems in the short story writing project. The researchers divided the problems into two: the internal problems and external problems. The internal problems come from the students themselves, such as writer's block and self-confidence. Meanwhile, the external problems from the text and the project completion, such as time to finish the project, how to connect stories/plot, and the language used to write the story (see data 3.1, 3.2, 3.3, 3.4, 3.5, 3.6).

Sometimes I lack ideas for how to make the next storyline, but by looking at some references, I can immediately continue the story. So, there's really nothing I don't like about this project. (Data 3.1/DyaASKA/Prob/3)

The thing that I don't like when writing something is running out of time because I need enough time to think of ideas to start writing. In addition, given the time, I feel less optimal in writing something. (Data 3.2/TasNS/Prob/3)

Overall, I like this project because I can get new experiences in writing. I can develop my ideas even though sometimes I feel stuck and find it difficult to find new ideas. (Data 3.3/NabDWProb//3)

I like how we have to write twice a week, but I also dislike the idea that I need to think before I write. Overall, I like the way we did the whole course. I study and write enough to feel a bit confident about it now. (Data 3.4/AlvRF/Prob/3)

That is the real challenge for me. The comparison is how to make a good connection between paragraphs. The conjunctions need such as furthermore, next, on the other hand, finally, overall, to sum up, and so on. That will make a good essay or even a story, but I am sure we don't use those conjunctions when we write the story. (Data 3.5/RafAF/Prob/3)

I need an idea. I don't know. Maybe I'm just not creative. That's why I don't like writing a narrative fiction. (Data 3.6/YashSAS/Prob/3)

From the thematic analysis, it was found that generating ideas became the biggest problem for the students. Interestingly, some students confessed that they had no problems at all. The most common problem was the writer's block. The writing block occurred because they had no idea how to continue the story. Based on the observation, the students felt that after deciding on an incident/event, they sometimes had difficulty deciding "what next" and how to connect the series of events. The data from the observation was confirmed by the self-reflection. Some of them stated "...but I am sure we don't use those conjunctions when we write the story" (Data 3.7/RafAF/Prob/3) and "...how do I connect one sentence with another sentence?" (Data 3.8/OlyvL/Problem/3).

Moreover, based on the observation, students also confessed that if they had an idea about the "what happens next" (plot), they had difficulties connecting the events to make the

storyline logical and believable. One of the difficulties was to make the plot interesting with an appealing ending, either a happy or a sad ending. The data from the observation is confirmed by the data from the self-reflection in which one of the students said,

I learn that making a narrative fiction is hard. You have to make sure that every event (in the story) connected together. The flow, the plot, and the resolution. (And) How the story ended. (Data 3.9/YashSAS/Prob/3)

Sometimes they had a problem with how to create a plot twist for the ending. Because of the demands they set themselves, like being perfect in writing the story, they had problems with the idea development that led to the climax and or ending. One of the students wrote in the self-reflection, "...I think when I make the plot and think about the good ending" (Data 3.10/MawN/Prob/3). Interestingly, some students said that they had no problems at all in making the short story project, while others stated that time constraint was their major problem in finishing the project. Based on the self-reflection data, these students said that they needed more time to write the story for the project. The finding also reveals that few students disliked doing the project because they had to use English to write the story, as stated by one of the students, *"I like the whole way, but it would be better if I could write short stories in Indonesian."* (Data 3.11/NazDFB/Problem/3). Another student disliked it because he did not write a story, let alone do it in English.

The internal problems

The internal problems that the students experienced were the writer's block and self-confidence. The writer's block is a common issue in foreign language (henceforth FL) writing, especially in the Indonesian context. Writer's block is a depressive feeling experienced by a writer when transferring thoughts to the paper, making the writer feel that they have no more ideas to write (Chintamani, 2014). One common problem that causes the writer's block is writing apprehension or writing anxiety (Qomariah, 2016). Kara (2013) states that one of the causes of the the writer's block is the low skills in writing, such as organising ideas and connecting them to make them logical and reasonable. Rosa and Genuino (2017) state that writers' block may be induced by the experienter's cognitive and psychological strain, even though these still need further investigation.

Interestingly, some students did not have any problems at all with the project. They enjoyed the project and had no reason to dislike it. Some of them even confessed that they enjoyed the project because it made them learn a lot. Yet, a small number of students admitted that the project was a burden for them (see Data 3.12, 3.13, 3.14, 2.16).

At first, I felt burdened and confused about how to start it. Then, I also don't have confidence in writing something. However, I did my best with my efforts, even though there were still many shortcomings. (Data 3.12/TasNS/prob/3)

When this project came out, I felt pressured because I didn't know what to write. I lack confidence in my writing when asked to write a story. (Data 3.13/NowKN/prob/3)

When this short story project came up, I felt that I couldn't write a good

story because I'm not good at writing stories. I like reading stories in both digital and book form, but I felt insecure when I was told to create a story. (Data 3.14/NabAP/prob/3)

I always feel nervous when someone is reading my work because I don't feel confident with it, but as time grows, I feel like maybe it is okay for people to constantly look at and review my work for me to get better in the future. (Data 2.16/AlvRF/Learned/2)

Another internal problem the students had was the feeling of insecurity or the lack of self-confidence about their own writing. Foreign language (FL) students often experience emotions of fear, nervousness, embarrassment, shame, and anger (Urrego & Valencia, 2021). They argue that all those emotions come from the pressure from others and their need to be "good" when they have to come up with a response to any activity. Moreover, FL students often feel discouraged when they are assigned to write (Listyani, 2021). Research on students' writing attitude in the Indonesian context has shown that not all students have confidence in their ability to write, whether it is in the form of academic writing (Purwanti & Kastuhandani, 2023) or narrative writing (Amelya et al., 2022). Students with a moderate writing attitude usually view writing as stressful and burdensome, whereas those with a high writing attitude view writing as a challenging activity (Setyowati & Sukmawan, 2016). To help students have more confidence in writing, Urrego and Valencia (2021) suggest that writing teachers/lecturers be more empathetic to students' writing problems and give encouragement if the writing is not as good as expected. Taking into account the present study, it becomes important to give students more opportunities to practice short story writing and give constructive feedback on the product. Instead of being judgemental, the writing lecturer can give encouragement and motivation to students that producing a good piece of story is a process.

CONCLUSION

In this project, students in a creative writing class created stories that address gender and social inclusion issues using PjBL. The findings reveal that students viewed the project positively in general and learned helpful skills in writing narratives, sharpened their critical thinking skills and used creative expression. In spite of the initial obstacles, including writer's block, a lack of confidence and trouble coming up with and structuring ideas, students eventually found the experience to be satisfying. The project also promoted empathy, social awareness, and personal development, underlining the wider educational advantages of incorporating issues from everyday life into writing practices. In the context of creative writing projects on gender and social inclusion issues, the study's findings suggest a close relationship between empathy and creativity. Many students stated that the process of their story writing and interviews with real-life experiences of exclusion, inequality, and prejudice had an impact on their writing. Students' emotional reactions to this exposure resulted in a greater level of understanding, sensitivity, and involvement with their stories.

Despite the internal and external challenges in the implementation of PjBL in creative writing, the study also identified three main areas of learning, namely the cognitive outcomes, affective outcomes, and behavioural outcomes (the soft skills). The cognitive outcomes involve the mastery of narrative structure (plot, characters, setting, conflict, resolution),

the perceived improved ability to organise ideas and create engaging short stories, and the increased awareness of gender and social inclusion issues through writing. Meanwhile, the affective outcomes cover the students' development of empathy and social awareness by engaging with real-life stories, perceived enhancement in self-confidence and resilience in writing, and better appreciation for diversity and inclusivity in storytelling. Finally, the behavioural outcomes present in improved time management and ability to work under deadlines, strengthened collaborative skills through peer feedback and group discussions, and enhanced critical thinking in developing realistic and meaningful narratives that relate to real-life context. In conclusion, the study suggests that PjBL is a useful strategy for improving cognitive and affective learning outcomes, fitting the objectives of education in the twenty-first century.

This research, however, has several limitations. Firstly, this research did not investigate the students' writing attitude when writing a story, and whether the project was effective in improving their writing skills in relation to short story writing. Therefore, future researchers need to investigate whether there is any correlation between students' attitude and their short story writing skills. Future studies can also investigate the direct impact of empathy on creative writing skills by using experimental or mixed-method research. Future studies can also explore the role of peer feedback and discussion in enhancing empathetic storytelling. With implications for psychology, education and creative writing pedagogy, the relationship between empathy and creativity in writing offers rich opportunities for further research exploration. Having all this information is beneficial for theoretical and practical significance, especially when they were done in a foreign language setting where English is not their native language.

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