

LESS IS **MORE**

TEACHING LITERATURE WITH SHORT TEXTS — GRADES 6–12

KIMBERLY HILL CAMPBELL



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[For Michael, John, and Kinsey]

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Foreword

Kimberly Campbell is a thoughtful, intentional teacher, and the case she makes for short texts in *Less Is More* is compelling. With insight and example she walks us through her classroom, introduces us to her students, and shows how short texts can transform the indifferent into engaged readers and writers.

I wish I had known Kimberly Campbell when I was first teaching high school. Back then, I was confronted with numerous students who were resolute nonreaders both in and outside of school. Some of this was due to skill issues, and some of it was due to indifference—if not resistance—to what was occurring in our classroom. So when I assigned extensive reading for the next day, it was almost guaranteed that virtually no one in the class would complete—or probably even attempt—the work. I quickly found that positive reinforcement was not a powerful inducement for these students, and the threat of failing grades was similarly ineffective; the novel’s chapters and the long essays remained either partially or completely unread, and the subsequent classes limped along.

I was a conscientious if not particularly skillful beginning teacher, and I worried about my classroom. It was painfully obvious to me that for both my students and myself, teaching and learning were not occurring. I concluded that there was no way to transform the situation directly, so I moved around it. Rather than continue to fight with my students and lose the battle almost every day, I decided to regroup and began using short texts that we could all experience at the same time.

In class, together, students and I would read silently or, more frequently, read aloud, and short stories, poems, and brief essays, both fiction and nonfiction, became our staples. The benefits were huge and virtually immediate: completing the reading was inescapable, and, when we read aloud, students could not only see the text but hear it read with real interpretive intonation, greatly enhancing comprehension. The activity immediately following the reading activity—discussion or writing—was reinforcing and organic; there was no gap between the reading and

the response. Interest improved, grades rose, and student and teacher satisfaction soared.

Kimberly Campbell knows all this and makes the point in *Less Is More* that using shorter texts addresses a number of instructional issues about which most of us conscientious teachers fret. For Campbell, short texts are a “great equalizer” that can serve to address the varying reading abilities of students in our classrooms. In addition, with short texts a teacher can more easily use a variety of genres: the short story, the essay, the memoir, the poem, children’s books, and graphic novels. With short texts teachers can directly incorporate reading strategies, use literature circles, and, for challenged readers and English language learners, convert the text to an audio recording and even into a second language translation. Texts can indeed be read aloud or read silently in class, but with shorter pieces, teachers can also be confident that students likely will complete these more manageable reading assignments on their own.

Clearly, I believe in the genius of small things, but this is not to argue that only short texts are acceptable in our classrooms. There is a place for the 5,000-line epic, the five-act play, and the 500-page novel. Some students will want to read *Middlemarch* or *Bleak House* or even *Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix*, and they should. Some teachers will want to incorporate some longer texts into their curriculum, and they should be welcome to do so. Certainly sustained concentration on a long text is a skill that will stand students in good stead long after they leave our classrooms.

But I do not feel that such longer texts should be the absolute center, the sine qua non, of the curriculum. As Kimberly Campbell notes, many of our colleagues face mandated English curriculums that consist entirely of canonical works, novels, long (mostly Shakespearian) plays, and virtually no poetry or short fiction and nonfiction. When students are confronted solely and consistently with texts that are complex and lengthy, there is resistance, a tendency to disengage and to look for shortcuts that may help complete a required assignment but that circumscribe or even totally avoid actual reading. Surely we as teachers do not want to contribute to the epidemic of nonreading that plagues so many English classrooms. Indeed, many students are skillful at doing almost anything with a long, canonical text but actually read it, at least as we expect it to be read. And, thanks to innumerable resources readily available on the Internet, this kind of nonreading can be almost undetectable.

Given a text that is manageable, though, most students are far less tempted to skip the assignment or to cram, skim, or run to the mother of all reading challenges, SparkNotes. Real learning can occur through tackling a shorter piece and examining a text that is, for many students, ultimately more manageable. In addition, exposure to a variety of literary genres—many of which are short texts—can do nothing but enhance a student’s interest in lifelong reading. Finally, a classroom literature community is easier to construct and maintain when students are actually reading and thus are legitimately engaged.

Shakespeare instructed us that brevity is the soul of wit; Wordsworth found freedom in the sonnet’s scanty plot of ground. For many of our students, exploring the small can also be intensely satisfying. Kimberly Campbell knows this, and *Less Is More* is a practical and smart discussion of how students and their teachers can find pleasure and profit in short pieces of literature that are well written and satisfying to complete. We can ask for no more.

— LEILA CHRISTENBURY

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