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BACKGROUND

A few key questions:

- The most valued texts in second-language classrooms are literary ones, creative works. Nevertheless, most of the assignments that students complete when working with these texts are analytical and interpretive in nature. Why don't we invite students to respond to these artistic texts in more personal and creative ways?
- When addressing deficits in college students' reading skills, Robert Scholes asserts: "The problem emerges as one of difference, or otherness—a difficulty in moving from the words of the text to some set of intentions (...) values or presuppositions different from one's own and possibly opposed to them" (166).

Class: Advanced-level Spanish literature class (taught in Spanish)

Activities: As a way of responding to novels we read in class, students completed 4 creative writing activities in which they had to take on the perspective of a character to compose a diary entry, a letter or a dialogue. They also wrote "author's statements" to explain their choices related to stylistic and content for each piece.

For example, here is one writing prompt: Write a journal entry exploring how Isabel feels at the end of chapter 16. What is she thinking about at this moment in her life? What is she worried about? What are her expectations for the future? Write a minimum of 300 words in which you explore Isabel's psychology at this moment in her life, and contemplate her concerns, her hopes, etc. Also write an 'author's statement' in which you explain your decisions in the journal entry—the information you decided to include, what information about the historical context you considered, perhaps specific passages from the novel that you reflected on, any stylistic choices of note, etc. (minimum of 60-80 words).

Hypothesis: I believe student engagement, knowledge of the source text and understanding of the socio-historic context will be enhanced through the creative writing activities they complete.

INTERACTIVE ACTIVITY

Think of one of your favorite films or novels and imagine that you are the protagonist of that film. If you were asked to write a letter from the perspective of that character to a close friend at a pivotal moment in the story, what themes and ideas would you explore?

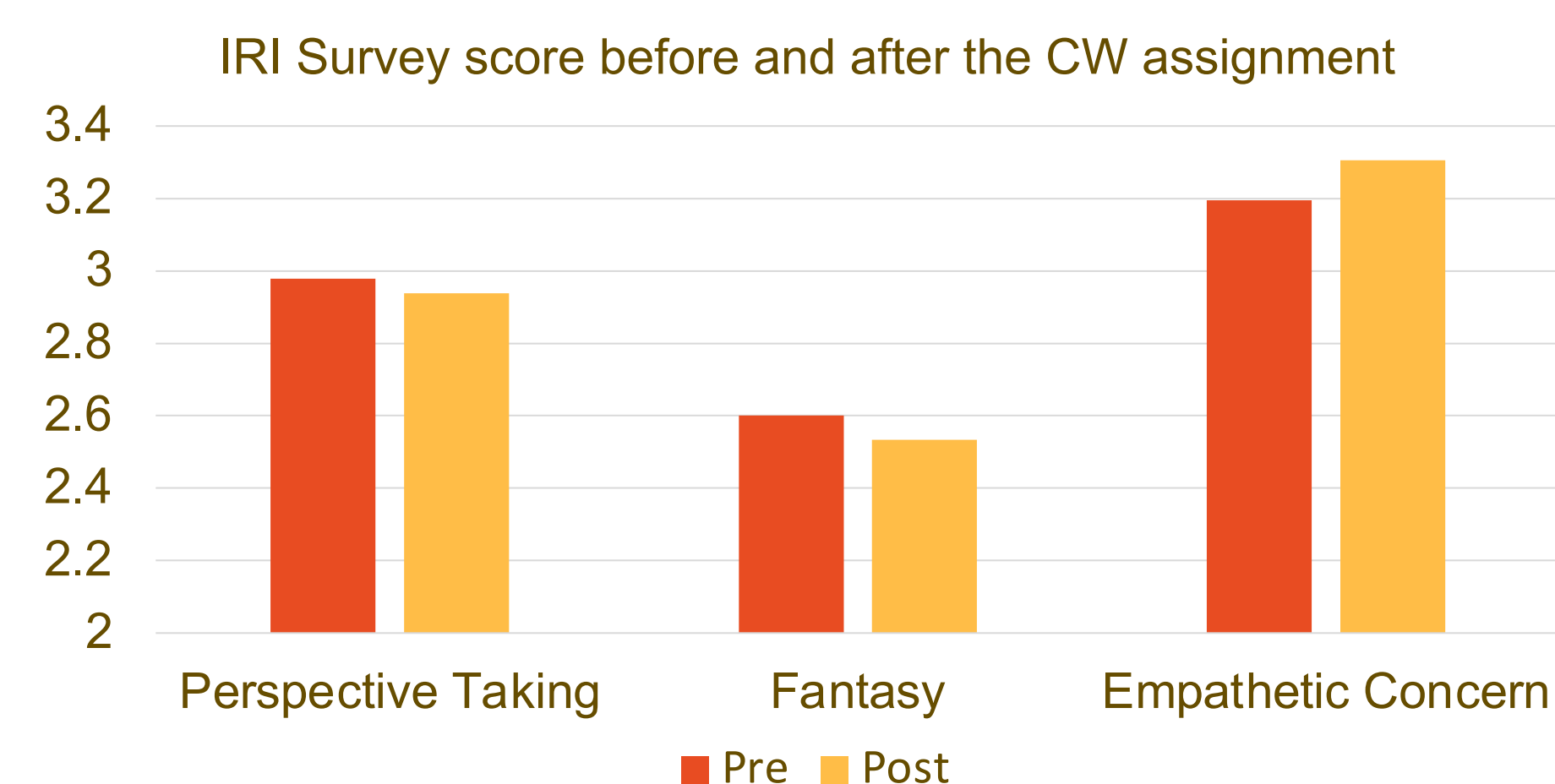
Some ideas of compelling films: *Star Wars*, *Sophie's Choice*, *American Beauty*

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Participants: 12 student participants (11 women; 1 man) in an advanced-level literature course taught in Spanish. 11 students were 2nd-language learners of Spanish; 1 was a heritage student.

Method: Students completed a pre- and post-survey in which they rated 13 different descriptors related to their experience of empathy in their daily lives. They completed the survey prior to doing any creative writing assignments, and then again after doing the 4 creative writing activities in class. In the post survey they also answered a series of open-ended questions about their experience of doing the creative writing activities. These questions probed if their understanding of the source text and the socio-historic context were enhanced, how engaging the activities were and the usefulness of a short reflective piece, an "author's statement".

RESULTS

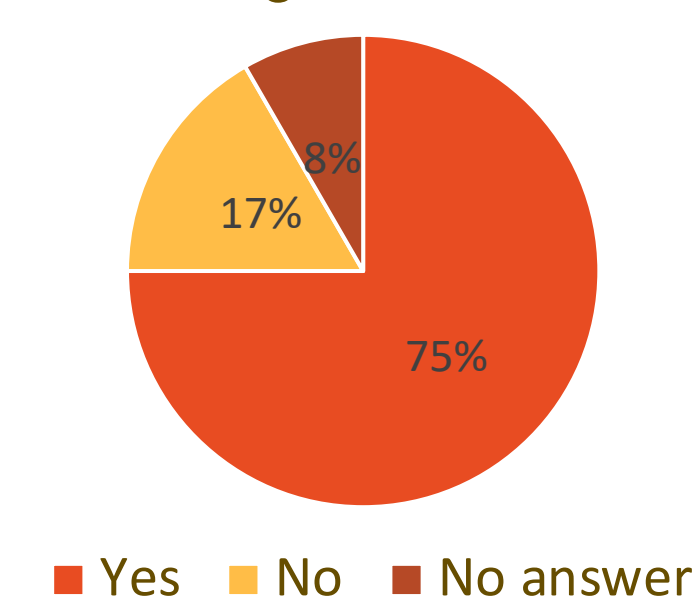


- A 2 (pre vs. post) x 3 (PT vs. FS vs. EC) factorial analysis revealed a significant main effect of the test type, but not between pre and post comparisons.
- Post hoc comparisons indicated that while for both Perspective Taking (PT) and Fantasy (FS) items the score decreased from pre to post, this was not a statistically significant difference; for Empathetic Concern (EC) the trend was reversed but also not statistically significant.

Further analyses were conducted on the student survey that they completed at the end of the quarter. The survey included questions related to their experiences of doing the creative writing experiences. Here are the main findings:

(1) If they gained new insights into the source text:

"I gained new insights into the source text"



Common themes: deeper engagement with characters' emotions, narrative empathy

Student quotes:

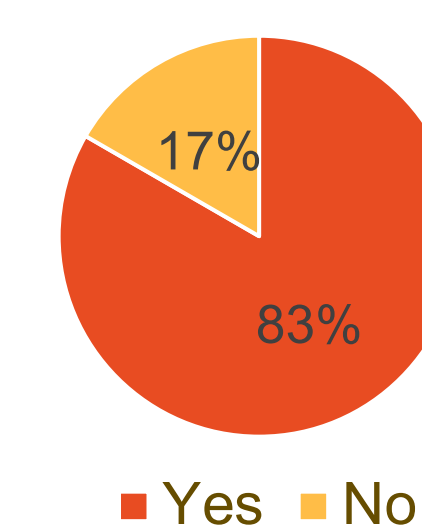
- "...the activity gave me new insights because they change the perspective from just reader/character to something deeper..."

- "it was purely the thoughts of the characters that you were inhabiting and it forced you to delve into their mind"

- "I was able to dive deeper within myself (...) I felt like I was able to relate to the characters of the novels more..."

(2) If they gained insights into the socio-historic context:

"I gained insights into the socio-historic context"



Common themes: application of knowledge, experience of empathy

Student quotes:

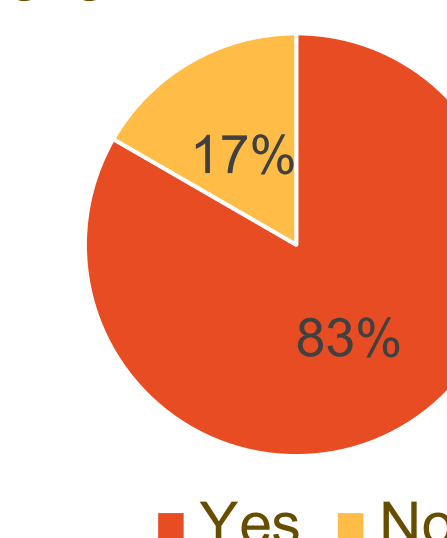
- "I was living, albeit briefly, in those times"

- "By putting myself in the characters situations I was able to (...) see what their life was like at that time. There were many restrictions that I had to abide by based on the context of early 20th century Spain."

- "I 100% feel that I came to a deeper understanding of the socio-historic context of the work. This is because I tried to put myself in the character's shoes."

(3) If they felt more engaged when doing these assignments:

"I felt more engaged while doing the assignments"



Common themes: the activities are perceived as more fun, more creative, unique

Student quotes:

- "I feel much more engaged when it comes to the creative writing assignments (...) I prefer to read fiction and things that are more creative (...) and thus I like to interact with a text in a more creative way. (...) Also it's not something I do much in school, so the uniqueness of it was a welcomed change"

- "I was much more emotionally engaged with the assignment"

- "The creative assignments felt more engaging because they were simply more fun"

- "I feel more engaged. (...) understanding the individual characters' relation to their socio-historic context was more difficult but rewarding."

- "I think these were more fun to do because they asked us to think outside the box."

(4) When asked if they considered how the novels' themes, ideas and situations related to their own lives, responses were mixed. Some students didn't see similarities, citing the vast difference in historic moment and geography. Others were able to find connections between their own experiences and those of the novels' characters.

Student quote:

- "What I loved is that even though the socio-historical time was very different (...), I could still relate to (...) the feelings of the characters or some of their internal conflicts and I think this is beautiful"

CONCLUSIONS

Based on student responses to the end-of-quarter survey, there is evidence that:

- they understand more fully the socio-historic context and the source text
- students felt more engaged by these activities than other more analytical ones
- they also enjoyed the uniqueness of these activities
- students regularly comment on their experience of narrative empathy.
- The IRI survey data did not show statistically significant change in students' experience of empathy in their everyday lives.

FUTURE DIRECTIONS

- It may not be surprising that students' experience of empathy in their everyday lives changed very little, however I wonder what the results would be if these types of activities were incorporating across a series of courses, a minor or a major.
- One of the measures on the IRI scale is the concept of "Perspective Taking", that is, the ability for individuals to infer someone else's beliefs, thoughts and emotions. "Perspective Taking" is most often studied in Developmental Psychology, DEI contexts and International education. I need to do more research in these disciplines to understand more fully how they conceptualize and measure this domain.
- Critic Suzanne Keene who studies the intersection of experiences of narrative empathy in literature and increased pro-social behavior asserts: "Conscious cultivation of narrative empathy by teachers (...) could at least point toward the potential for novel reading to help citizens respond to real others with greater openness and consciousness of their shared humanity."
- Given the extremely polarized society in which our students live, allowing them to practice taking on the perspective of a person very different from themselves seems like an important opportunity to help create more empathetic and conscientious citizens.
- Different aspects of my study engage with the DU 4D experience—namely, exploring character and advancing intellectual growth. I plan to continue to explore these possibilities in the next iteration of the course.
- In the next iteration of this course in Spring 2024, I will add an additional open-ended question in the post-survey to see if there is any aspect of students' experience with these activities that my initial questions did not capture. I will also add some focus group discussions to get a better sense of student experiences with narrative empathy, and the "author's statements."

REFERENCES

- Keene, Suzanne. 2007. *Narrative and Empathy*. Oxford UP.
Scholes, Robert. 2002. "The Transition to College Reading." *Pedagogy* 2:165-172.