

Tulane SoPA students write children's books, with four to hit shelves this year

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sopanews@tulane.edu



A few of SoPA's student authors opted for the assistance of artificial intelligence when it came to creating their book illustrations. (Photo from Tulane SoPA)

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What started as a normal Tulane School of Professional Advancement (Tulane SoPA) course on children and adolescent literature quickly evolved into a writer's studio that resulted in several students becoming published children's book authors.

Richard Mihans, a senior professor of practice in Tulane SoPA's education program, said that he sought a different approach to teaching students about the psychology involved in developing stories that explain sophisticated topics from a perspective that a child would understand. Although he's taught courses since 2005, it was his first on children's literature.

"I usually teach reading methodology," Mihans said. "With this new course, I wanted my students to understand that children's literature is no different than adult literature because it deals with the same emotions, just with different contextual topics. I also wanted them to experience the process of becoming an author."

Ultimately, Mihans tasked each of the 24 students with writing their own children's book using the topic and age level of their choosing. In return, the students encouraged Mihans to write his own children's book alongside them.

"They were right. I needed to grapple with the same challenges I was putting forth to them," he said. "We gave each other feedback all the time. We talked about how great topics come from life experience. We developed storyboards together. It truly turned into a magical class."

Mihans connected with Covenant Books, a South Carolina-based publishing house that agreed to review manuscripts from any of Mihans' students who wanted to submit them. The result — four children's books will be published in the coming months, including Mihans' own story based on his grandmother's lessons about using the stars for guidance. The students' books focus on a rabbit who enjoys playing with elephants, a boy who struggles with lactose intolerance, and a child who struggles to overcome his fears.

Mihans said it was important for him to not force his students to submit their manuscripts for review and possible publication, but the opportunity still exists in the future if a student decides they do want to pursue that path.

"I encouraged them to look at the process as another form of feedback," Mihans said. "I set up the class in such a way that I wanted it to be a community of learners. We did a lot of focused sessions and small groups to help students overcome specific challenges. By the end of the semester, everyone knew everyone else's story."

Mihans said he hopes to teach a similar class in the future and is already applying the lessons he learned to his other courses.

“As a professor, this teaching method was freeing. I learned that I don’t have to control everything the way I thought I had to,” he said. “I give students a lot of choice now. The end goal is to make sure they understand certain concepts and achieve certain learning objectives, but there can be a lot of variety in how you get there.”

Tulane SoPA offers a comprehensive educator preparation program for individuals interested in careers in the classroom, school administration or instructional design. Bachelor’s degrees, master’s degrees and professional certificate programs are available. The programs combine hands-on coursework and focused field experience. For more information, visit sopa.tulane.edu/edu.