
Reflecting on NAWE's first Virtual Conference

Fiona Mason

What Next?

Writing in Education and Communities in 2021 and Beyond



12-13 March 2021

Online

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nawe national association of
writers in education

The NAWE conference has become something of an annual fixture, a November gathering of writers working in education and community settings, coming together to share practice, lunch and swap tales from the facilitating front line over late-night drinks at the bar.

Thrust into the reality of the global pandemic, we initially postponed the conference to March, imagining that it might all be over by then. We organised the virtual Open Space event to provide a sense of community in the usual November slot.

Then, as the pandemic showed no signs of slowing, we finally had to admit that the usual face-to-face conference couldn't take place.

It was sad, but writers in education are a resourceful lot and many of us were getting more accustomed to zoom. The majority of formal education, from primary to HE, had shifted online. And the plethora of online workshops, courses and spoken word events, many led by NAWE members, all grew in appeal and reach as a necessary tool to combat the isolation of lockdown.

In that context, we took the plunge to shift our much loved and familiar conference online.

Rather than focus on what we'd lose from a face-to-face event, we instead chose to focus on the incredible opportunity the online forum would provide, the greatest of which was accessibility.

Members have long commented that there were real barriers to attending conference: travel time, travel cost, ticket prices and caring duties being the top four. The online format would solve all of this in one fell swoop.

Perhaps the greatest challenge in curating the conference was how much of the old format we should retain. Did we want it to feel like putting on an old pair of slippers, comfy and familiar, or were we going to step out in something bolder and snazzier?

We aimed for somewhere in between – enough of the familiar elements to make it *feel* like a NAWE conference, whilst embracing the technology and the opportunity to draw together contributors, speakers and participants from far and wide into two days of panels, workshops and readings.

One thing I love about curating online events is that they place fewer demands on a speaker's time. There's no more trying to sell the virtues of the 6-hour train journey through lovely countryside for a 45-minute panel. In fact, when I reflect on the Before Time, how many of us spent a bazillion hours arriving compared to the amount of time we actually spent being or doing? Asking for an hour or two of a busy person's time is very different to asking for a day. As a result, we found our guests eager to contribute, creating a diverse, rich and interesting line-up of panels, readings and workshops that we might not have so readily achieved otherwise.

The greatest challenge to transitioning from the old familiar to the shiny and new was the demands it would place on our audience and participants. According to Professor Derek Neale, Creative Writing Qualification Lead in the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences at the Open University, online teaching hours have a roughly 1:2 ratio to face-to-face: "The OU has found it essential to have briefer online teaching sessions compared to the equivalent face to face sessions. This is a common conclusion arrived at over a number of years, not just through Covid-19 adjustments. A common equivalence we work with now is 1-1.5 hours online for a 3-4 hours face to face session."

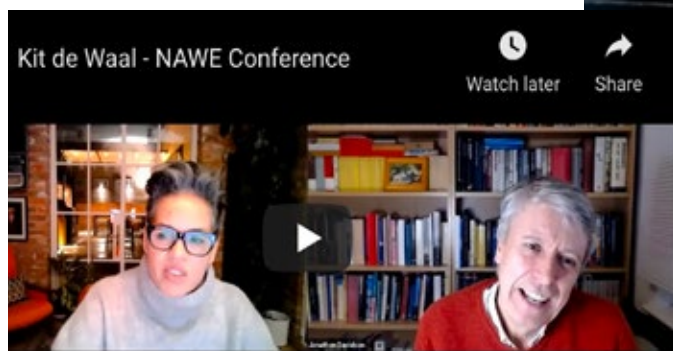
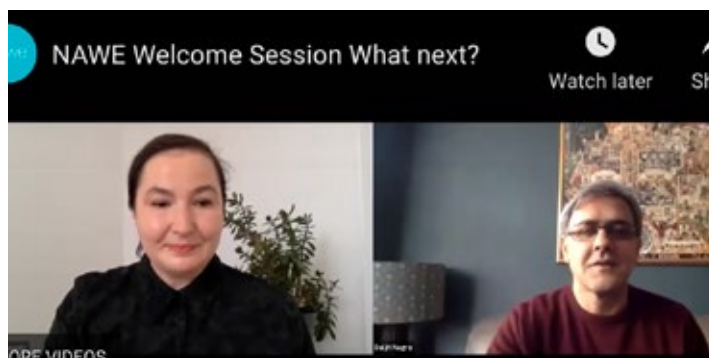
So, it was not too much of a stretch to imagine that an online conference, full of stimulating, content-rich sessions that demand focus and attention, might also prove to be very tiring.

The old conference format typically had 100+ sessions across five or six concurrent streams. With many excellent proposals submitted, we could have easily replicated this. But mindful of the online environment, we curated a conference of four strands: a core strand of guest panelists, workshops and talks and then three contributed strands around the themes of wellbeing, online teaching and practice research.

We anticipated that people would find it difficult to remain online for two entire days, so we recorded all but a couple of the sessions to be available to ticket holders for a further two months. This meant that attendees had agency to curate their own conference, building in as many screen-and-tea-breaks as they needed, secure in the knowledge that they could watch again across the full breadth of the conference at their leisure.

Conference Highlights

In a conference packed with such a fantastic array of quality events, it's difficult to single out specific sessions for special praise. But a personal highlight was that there was a strong sense of event, which was entirely thanks to an audience that was fully engaged in the conference, playing an active role throughout. The chat was lively and the conversation honest and there was a real sense of peer support. Post-conference feedback from attendees supports these impressions. People were pleasantly surprised about how well the online format worked. Many attended who would not have otherwise been able to, and found a community of writers brimming with warmth, generosity and curiosity.



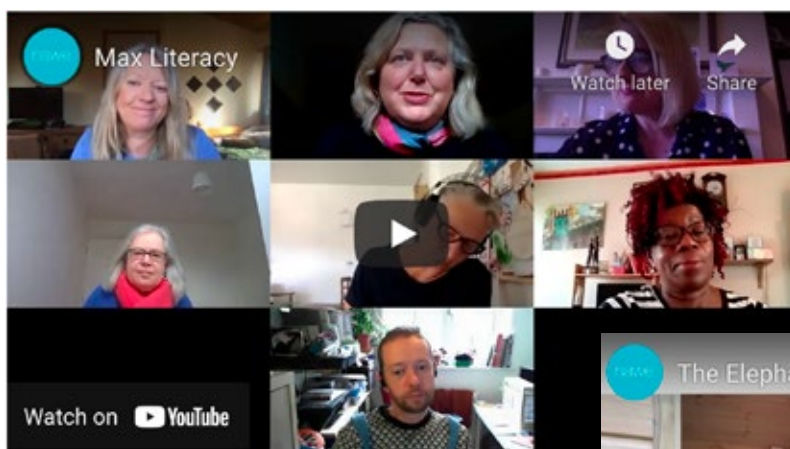
So, What's Next?

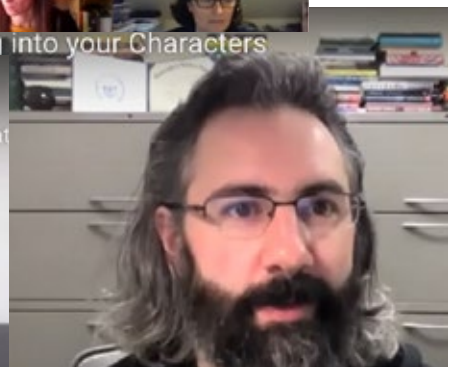
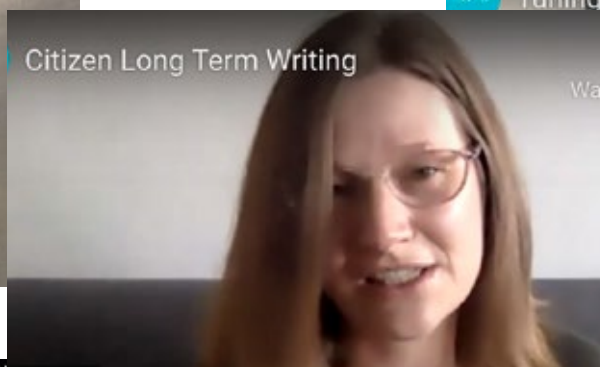
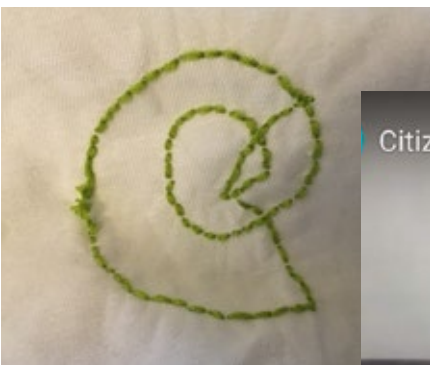
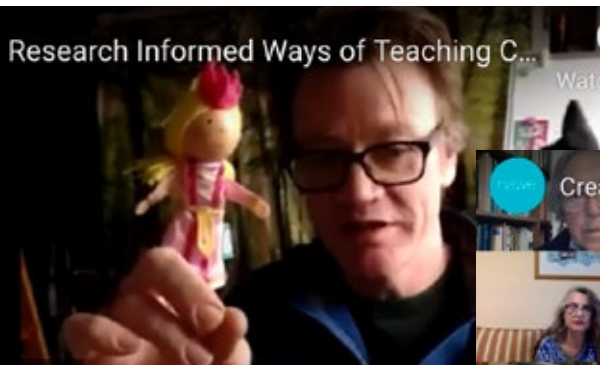
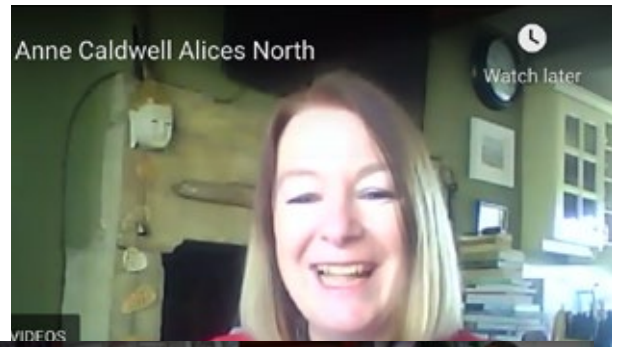
The theme of the conference was 'What Next?', so did we reach any conclusions? The conversations were wide ranging across multiple topics of particular relevance in this time of pandemic. Over the space of two days, we were unlikely to reach a definitive answer to our question, but as we reflect upon the quality of the content and the feedback we've received, we have a strong sense of a commitment to continue sharing, thinking and planning for whatever does come next. The UK Arts Councils meet next month to continue the sector wide conversation which began at conference. Peer networks of researchers and practitioners who connected at conference are becoming established. And at NAWE, we've also got a much stronger sense of what we can do to support writers working across education and community settings. Our work over the next 6-12 months will focus on expanding our participation and engagement programme, providing professional development opportunities for members and non-members as writers continue to navigate the new normal and create sustainable futures for their careers and creative practice.

And as we start thinking about the next conference, we want to hear from all of you. What feel like the biggest challenges and priorities right now? What can NAWE do to support you – either directly or by signposting to other opportunities? The more we know about what you need, the better job we can do of programming a conference that will feel useful and relevant.

Thank You

Finally, a big thank you. To all conference contributors and speakers, The Poetry Business, NAWE board of trustees, NAWE members, Mosaic, NAWE staff team, Writing West Midlands, Arts Council England, this year's conference sponsor: York St John University, and all who played their part. Most of all, thanks to all the attenders for their enthusiasm and engagement, which truly made the conference the special event it was.





Embracing Found Strategies in Ecopoetry

Carrie Etter

Over the last six or seven years, I've had an increasing interest in ecopoetry which has led me to value more and more the strategies of found poetry. Following John Shoptaw's definition, I view ecopoems as those that concern the nonhuman natural world and take an ecocentric, as opposed to anthropocentric, position. As Shoptaw remarks, "Human interests cannot be the be-all and end-all of an ecopoem." In my view, ecopoetry can range from "nature poems" that show appreciation for a particular place, independent of its "human use value", to the poetry of environmental crisis, addressing such matters as the loss of species, climate change, the accumulation of plastics in marine waters, etc.

As for found poetry, the Academy of American Poets defines it thus: "Found poems take existing texts and refashion them, reorder them, and present them as poems. The literary equivalent of a collage, found poetry is often made from newspaper articles, street signs, graffiti, speeches, letters, or even other poems. A pure found poem consists exclusively of outside texts: the words of the poem remain as they were found, with few additions or omissions. Decisions of form, such as where to break a line, are left to the poet."

As you may already anticipate from these definitions, ecopoetry and found poetry both actively draw on other texts in their composition. Many ecopoems draw on research, both experiential (visiting particular places, observing other forms of life) and textual (articles in newspapers and other periodicals, scientific reports, etc.), so incorporating such textual material into the ecopoem seems a natural development.

There are four main strategies in the use of found materials in ecopoetry, erasure (also referred to as redaction), interspersal, dramatic monologue, and shape. In her erasure of this passage from Ralph Waldo Emerson, Janis Butler Holm has removed all of the nouns.

He is a ____ who occupies every ____ of his rightful ____; he is there in proper ____ to the farthest _____. Not every ____ is himself and his best ____ at all ____ and to his finger _____. Many great ____, perhaps the ____, have more or less neutral or waste _____. You must penetrate a ____ before you reach the real _____. Or there is a good wide ____ of the ____ which is sure to put them on good ____ with the ____ of their _____.

As Harriet Tarlo comments in her essay, "The Eco-Ethical Poetics of Found Text in Contemporary Poetry," "With

the nouns removed from these passages, the verbs of occupation and penetration leap out at us, revealing the not entirely attractive desire that the original writers projected onto natural objects or landscapes" (119). While Holm's erasure at once creates a new poem and interrogates the original, we should also keep in mind the possibility of play in the work of erasure, that, by removing portions of a found text, we create new works that relish felicitous discoveries of the possibilities within the given material.

The second strategy I call interspersal, interspersing or integrating found text among the poet's own words. When the found material consists of nonfiction, such as government reports and newspaper articles, juxtaposed against the poet's words its use presents a second, contrasting register that enhances the sense of differences of perspective, as we see in this passage of Wendy Mulford's "Salthouse 1099, 1953" where italics designate the found material:

*The cost of protection would be out of
proportion to the value of the limited
land area protected:
by the time the sea-bank goes the worst will be
over — approximately 40% of the houses are empty
much of the year — it would be cheaper to buy up
all the properties at risk
than to spend £500,000 on sea defences*

hedges tall & plump with berries
hips sloe elder slide off
drop in delayed harvest
sea-lavender faded heather gorse
burning slow crab-
bodies track the marsh worn worm-
coils tile the pools oyster-
catchers scratch the air (54)

In this example, the poet's immersive description provides an implicit rebuttal to the detached valuation in the found text and raises the question of what we mean by value when we are discussing the environment.

The third strategy for the use of found material is dramatic monologue—that is, integrating found material into the speech of a persona. In the following passage from Peter Reading's book-length poem on climate change, -273.15, the incorporation of the factual material into a conversational voice diminishes its didacticism and

gives it a sense of immediacy. The passage reads:

And didya read how a survey of all them Brit birds and butterflies shows there's some sorta population decline?, [Yes, in a series of censuses that combed about every square yard of England, Scotland and Wales over forty years, more than 20,000 volunteers managed to count each bird, native plant and butterfly they could find. They reported that the populations of all the species surveyed were in sharp decline—many extirpated completely.] and didya read how two surveys of 1,200 sumthin plants showed a decrease of 28%? [Yes, frail planet undergoing its sixth great extinction—Cambrian, Devonian, Permian, Triassic, Cretaceous, Holocene]

The fourth and final strategy for the use of found material in ecopoetry is shape. Here the poet does not provide original text, but selects from and shapes the found material. In "Wings over Scotland", Kathleen Jamie presents a list that starkly shows where a wild bird (protected under the Wildlife and Countryside Act) was found, what kind of bird it was, how it was killed, and what the final ruling was. As we see in the poem's opening lines, Jamie positions to the left the dead and the causes of death, to the right, the rulings that, emboldened by the poet, show the lack of action.

Estate: poisoned buzzard (Carbofuran). **No prosecution.**

Millden Estate: poisoned buzzard (Alphachloralose). **No prosecution.**

Millden Estate: poisoned golden eagle 'Alma' (Carbofuran). **No prosecution.**

Jamie explains in the notes at the end of the book that this piece is "[a] 'found' poem, alas," and provides a link to a website titled "Raptor Persecutions UK" (61).

These then are the main strategies I've discovered for using found material in ecopoetry: erasure, interspersal, dramatic monologue, and shape. Using found materials via these strategies reaps numerous benefits for ecopoetry, from interrogating the original texts to effectively incorporating scientific findings to providing a way to weave together multiple registers. The use of found materials also enables the student poet looking for

a way in without resorting to cliched images or didactic rants. To be able to take a passage of Henry David Thoreau's *Walden* or Mary Hunter Austin's *The Land of Little Rain* (both usefully out of copyright) and try an erasure of a page or intersperse their own words among the authors' both strengthens their understanding of the original works and facilitates their creation of new work.

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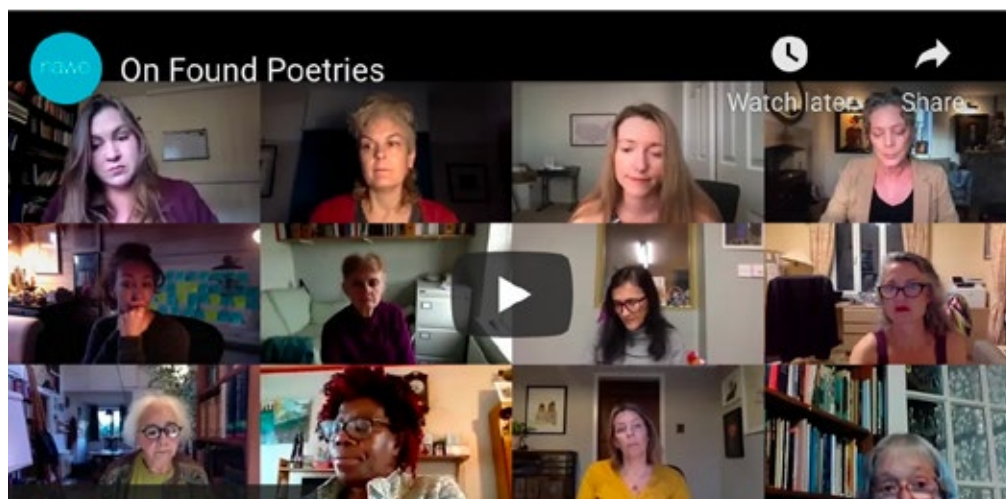
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ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

Carrie Etter has published four collections of poetry, most recently *The Weather in Normal* (UK: Seren; US: Station Hill, 2018), a Poetry Book Society Recommendation. She also edited *Infinite Difference: Other Poetries by UK Women Poets* (Shearsman, 2010) and Linda Lamus's posthumous collection, *A Crater the Size of Calcutta* (Mulfran, 2015). She also publishes essays, short fiction, and reviews. She has taught creative writing at Bath Spa University since 2004, where she is Reader in Creative Writing.



Engaging students in (distance) learning

Gaja Kołodziej

Over the years and continents, I have had the pleasure and privilege of meeting many excellent writers. Unfortunately, great artists do not automatically mean great teachers. While studying in Poland, the Netherlands, and New Zealand, I was reminded over and over again that having knowledge and the ability to share it are two very different things. In arts in particular the bar is raised which causes, at least to me, an equal amount of challenge and frustration.

Back in the day, modern teaching was about the art of making presentation slides. Teachers used to sweat over finding the perfect ratio of text, graphics, transitions, animations, and colourful highlights—as student-friendly as possible, to accompany lectures and tutorials. To some, it is still more black magic than a well-practised balance.

These days, however, slides are not enough. Teachers are encouraged (if not forced) to record videos, run online discussions, use tools and software supporting distance learning. Suddenly teaching no longer involves face to face contact. Instead, it has evolved into a virtual presence which is a tough substitute in terms of a student-teacher relationship.

Raised by a mother-teacher, I never wished to follow her footsteps. In my youth, school seemed like a forced labour camp I preferred to avoid rather than to become involved with. Looking back, I see the problem lay in the lack of choice—I learnt what I had to instead of what I wanted to know. Only when given a choice, I realised the empowering nature of the ability to determine one's future. Empowering students has become the goal of my teaching, and it continues to influence both my virtual and personal interactions with students.

According to self-determination theory, people have three psychological needs which affect their motivation and choices. These three needs are: competence (a feeling of having necessary skills to complete a task), autonomy (a feeling of being in control of one's life), and relatedness (a sense of belonging and connection with others). By addressing these needs, teachers can support students' inherent potential and guide them towards growth.

While the theory may sound less familiar to some than to others, the key concepts are rather logical and sensible, as it often happens in psychological science which tends to discover what has been there all along. The theory is adopted by Maggie Hartnett, the author of *Motivation in Online Education*, who assigns corresponding solutions

to each of the three needs. These solutions are again logical and sensible—well-known to teachers focused on facilitating learning experience.

To address the issue of competence, Maggie Hartnett advises teachers to provide students with supportive guidance, useful feedback, and clear guidelines. At the same time, she stresses the importance of offering students ongoing encouragement and optimal challenges—not too difficult to avoid self-doubt, and not too easy to prevent disinterest.

In terms of autonomy, she recommends supporting students' individuality by offering them choices. Indeed, choices! Food and fuel in leading students towards growth by allowing them to take control over their lives. Using a non-controlling language is just as important, for it supports and fosters students' independence.

The third and final need is called relatedness but is also known as connection. A corresponding solution is simple: to be considerate and respectful, always including, never excluding. To engage with students by establishing a personal connection through self-disclosure. Hence, to be an insider, not an outsider observing others from distance or even worse from above. To be a coach rather than an educator, a friendly hand, an ally on a learning journey.

Perhaps, these solutions are not a novelty to you. If fact, I hope it is so. And yet the reality rarely matches our dreams. Although I was aware of these guidelines long before reading Hartnett's book, every now and then I catch myself disregarding them. Whether it is caused by time, pressure, or other circumstances, it doesn't matter, for the impact on students (especially sensitive arts students) can be detrimental. So I keep reflecting on my teaching practice, and keep trying to improve myself.

These days when teachers are expected to also be IT experts, these guidelines are more difficult to follow. But in the ever-changing world with its speeding technology, novel professions, global living, and multiple citizenships, old-school teaching should be discarded as no longer applicable. In view of the current pandemic and future ones to come, virtual teaching is here for good.

We all have to adjust and make the best of it. Instead of reminiscing, let us learn to use the software to its fullest potential. And search for ways to provide encouragement and feedback as personal as possible in this impersonal reality. The pandemic has challenged us as teachers,

but we have also been given a choice: to see it as an opportunity or a drawback. We should appreciate the choices we have as they encourage us and our students to grow.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

Gaja Kołodziej, PhD, AFHEA, is a novelist, a creative writing teacher, and a member of the Polish Writers' Association. She published ten novels in YA, NA, women's fiction, and romance genres. She has a master's degree in psychology and a doctorate in creative writing.



Understanding Character Complexity through Personality Psychology

Kira-Anne Pelican

Writing in *Aspects of a Novel* in 1927¹, British author E M Forster is well known for having made the contrast between “round” and “flat” characters. According to Forster, while round characters are complex, engaging and feel real, they also typically transform and continue to surprise the reader in believable ways. By contrast, flat characters are consistently described in terms of a few fixed personality traits, but serve the useful purpose of supporting the main characters and storyline.

Although literary criticism has for many years resisted the notion that we should consider any aspects of fictional characters as though they are real, the tide may now be beginning to turn². For writers of realist fiction as well as creative writing tutors, the idea that central characters should feel believable and multi-dimensional is widely received. Despite this, definitions of character complexity remain so vague as to be almost useless in practice. While some authors define character complexity as meaning that the character is layered, dimensional and flawed, these definitions throw up more questions than answers. What exactly is layering in relation to

character complexity? How many dimensions does a complex character need and what are these dimensions? Without a robust framework for understanding fictional character complexity, how are we able to know when it is achieved? Of course, we may feel that a character has sufficient complexity, but wouldn't it be helpful if we could back up those feelings with evidence?

In my NAWA 2021 Conference session, expanded upon in my book *The Science of Writing Characters* (2020)³, I proposed that the Big Five model of personality provides a useful and valid definition of character complexity⁴. This Five Factor model is widely accepted within psychology as the best method of understanding individual differences within the ways in which people behave, relate to others, experience the world emotionally and construct belief systems. That is to say, that it is a robust model of personality. The Five Factor model reveals that personality is only captured in full when described across five independent dimensions: Extroversion, Agreeableness, Neuroticism, Conscientiousness and Openness to Experience.

1 Forster, Edward Morgan. *Aspects of the Novel*. Vol. 19. Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 1985.

2 Vermeule, Blakey. *Why do we care about literary characters?*. JHU Press, 2010.

3 Pelican, Kira-Anne. *The Science of Writing Characters: Using Psychology to Create Compelling Fictional Characters*. Bloomsbury Academic, 2020.

4 Costa Jr, Paul T., and Robert R. McCrae. "From catalog to classification: Murray's needs and the five-factor model." *Journal of personality and social psychology* 55.2 (1988): 258.

One of the first dimensions that we notice in others, Extroversion vs Introversion, describes the degree to which someone is outwards facing, gaining energy from their social interactions, as compared to being inward facing, quieter and reflective. Agreeableness vs Disagreeableness reveals how caring, selfless and cooperative an individual is, as opposed to being selfish and having little regard for others. Neuroticism vs Emotional Stability measures the strength of people's emotional sensitivity to the world. Conscientiousness vs Unconscientiousness captures individual variations in responsibility and dutifulness. Finally, Openness to Experience vs Closed to Experience measures the degree to which we are open-minded or closed minded.

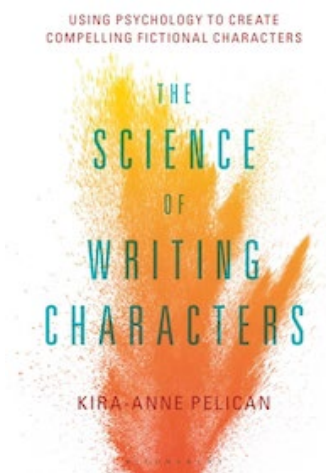
Each of these five dimensions expresses a continuum of personality and each of these are independent of each other. That is to say that the degree to which someone rates on Extroversion, has no relationship with the degree to which they rate on Emotional Stability. Since variances across these personality dimensions are normally distributed across the population, the vast majority of people that we meet in our day to day lives lie somewhere in the middle of each of the five personality dimensions. For example, most people aren't exceptionally introverted, or exceptionally extroverted, but instead fall somewhere between these extremes. More memorable people – and therefore more memorable characters – will therefore tend to be the outliers. They are more likely to be characterised as having personality traits falling closer towards the extremes of each personality dimension. As an example, it follows that a character who is shown to be particularly assertive, talkative and upbeat, personality traits associated with being highly extroverted, is far more likely to stay in our minds than a character who is neither particularly extroverted nor introverted. For writers of realist fiction, this may be a useful insight into how to create characters that are more memorable.

Psychological research reveals that while personality captures our "core self" or the way in which we behave when we're acting most authentically, we typically exhibit a variety of behaviours in our everyday lives, some of which are more "in character" than others. This is because we adapt our behaviour according to our mood, the social context and what it is that we are hoping to achieve. The influence of these factors on behaviour may help us to better understand why many of the most compelling characters often behave in surprising but believable ways, just as E. M. Forster observed. Take, for example, the character Lisbeth Salander from *The Girl with a Dragon Tattoo* (Larsson, 2005), and how she transforms from the quiet, reflective introvert to active, violent and sadistic when feeling threatened by a man. Given the character's traumatic backstory, her initially surprising "out of character" behaviour feels completely believable in the circumstances and even more so when we see her character repeat this behaviour every time she is placed in a similar situation.

In my NAWE 2021 Conference session I noted that for some writers the Big Five model of personality may be a useful starting point when developing new characters. Other writers may prefer to develop their characters intuitively, write a treatment or first draft, then use this framework as a tool for further reflection on their characters. If they have received a note that their main characters are too "thinly drawn", or that they lack believability or are unengaging, this approach provides a robust framework for understanding why. For creative writing tutors, personality psychology may be useful as an analytical tool - as a method of interrogating character complexity and helping students solve problems related to this. When research into personality psychology offers many fascinating insights into why some fictional characters are more believable, compelling and memorable than others, it feels time that we should explore it.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

Kira-Anne Pelican, PhD (Bangor, 2017), MBPsS is a writer and independent researcher who is interested in psychological approaches towards character development. She is the author of *The Science of Writing Characters: Using Psychology to Create Compelling Fictional Characters* (Bloomsbury Academic, 2020). Her original screenplays have been optioned by the BBC and ITV and she gives regular workshops on character psychology to universities, film schools, colleges, and writing conferences.



The potentials of creative writing in healthcare education: a learning journey of theory into practice

Roshni Beeharry

I have previously presented versions of my work in using writing with chronic pain patients and healthcare education, to healthcare and healthcare education audiences, firstly at the Association of Medical Humanities (AMH) conference, *Shadows and Ashes*, June 2018, and then as a short presentation for Irish Network of Healthcare Educators (INHED), so it was a real honour and privilege to be selected by the NAWC committee to present to a new audience of largely non clinical colleagues in education and writers, from across the UK and Ireland, writers and poets who had worked/work in medical schools or in healthcare, Writing for Wellbeing practitioners, and I was delighted to also “meet” two fellow clinician-writers (who use writing with students and/or colleagues as part of their work).

A bit about me

I have been a writer since childhood (short stories), and a poet and a doctor since my mid-20s, moving formally to a Medical Education career working in University settings since 2011 (and giving up clinical practice that year).

During my full time Specialist Registrar training (the period of specialist training in a field, in my case Rehabilitation Medicine), I trained on the MA Creative Writing & Personal Development, Sussex university in 2003-5, with the main aim of using writing alongside my clinical skills, with patients and those in the community, for wellbeing. I was specifically drawn to this idea because returning to writing and discovering the healing potential of writing poetry in particular, after my brother died, helped me in my grief process, another lifelong journey.

My dissertation project was a participatory arts action research project, running a weekly creative writing workshop over the three weeks of an inpatient with inpatients on a Chronic Pain inpatient management, at the Royal National Orthopaedic Hospital, then one of only two such inpatient programmes in London, where I had trained the year before as part of my Rehabilitation Medicine training programme, my chosen speciality.

The literature review as part of that degree, gave me a deeper understanding of the concepts of the Arts in Health and *Narrative Medicine* [1], a field much more advanced at the time of my research project (2005), in the US than in the UK, citing Dr Rita Charon, physician and the pioneer of Narrative Medicine, based at Columbia University Medical School, USA:

“it is medicine practised with narrative competence “to recognize, absorb, interpret, and be moved by the stories of illness.” (Charon (2016) in Zaharias (2018))

My interest in the Arts and Health and in the Medical/Health Humanities continued unabated, and developed in various forms, and this interest and work led me to being invited to be a Poetry and short prose reviewer, for two peer-reviewed American medical journals, *Family Medicine* [2] and *Families, Systems & Health* [3], since 2017.

In 2013, I completed my MA in Clinical Education, at the Institute of Education London, and chose to do my dissertation in the field of creative writing in health care education, as I was excited about the potential to run writing workshops as an educator with medical students, utilising the skills I had gained on my first MA and also my developing facilitation skills as an educator, each of which of course complimented, fed into and strengthened the other skill set, and continue to do so.

In October 2020, I set up my small business *Storied Selves* [4], Writing for Wellbeing & Personal Development, offering writing workshops for the public, those in healthcare related fields, organisations and those receiving care in healthcare, social care and community settings. A satisfying culmination of a 15 year learning journey, and of course, happily so, the start of another learning journey!

1 Zaharias G. (2018) What is narrative-based medicine? *Canadian Family Physician* March: 64(3): 176–180. This paper gives an excellent overview of the field, the varying definitions and aims of Narrative Medicine or Narrative-based Medicine as it is also called, and the leaders in the field in the USA and UK.

2 *Family Medicine journal*, <https://journals.stfm.org/familymedicine/>

3 *Families, Systems and Health* <https://www.apa.org/pubs/journals/fsh>

4 *Storied Selves* <http://storiedselves.com/>

Overview of my NAWE presentation

The 50 minute workshop fell into two parts:

Part I: A summary of my unpublished systematic review 'The potentials of creative writing in healthcare education' (2013)

Part II: Theory into practice: a learning journey

- Special Study Module in Creative Writing for Personal & Professional Development for Medical Students
- Discussion of delegate thoughts, and ideas re. collaboration between writers and healthcare professionals (HCPS), running writing events in healthcare education and /or healthcare settings.

The project findings in overview:

Research questions:

- What are the potential benefits and applications of using creative writing within clinical education?
- What are the potential 'mechanisms' by which writing can achieve its educational effects in clinical education? (The only aspect of this that I had scope to discuss in this workshop was to openly acknowledge the "cringe-induceness" of the word 'mechanisms,' for something as inherently non-mechanistic as creative writing, even in 2013 -it was written as here, in inverted commas in my dissertation to acknowledge this.)

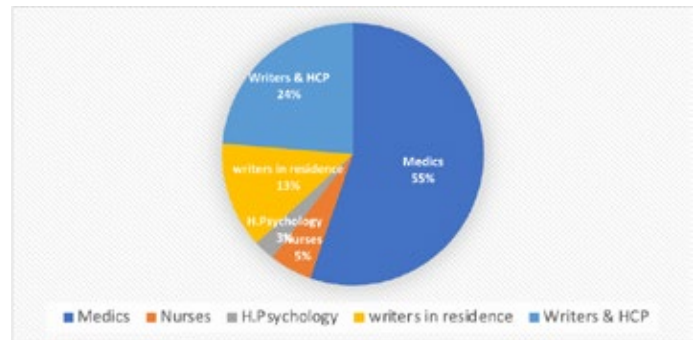
International literature from health care and humanities database search including MEDLINE, humanities databases was searched, and the stringent systematic review process resulted in 32 articles, spanning from the USA (69% of articles), UK(19%)Canada (6%), Australia(3%)and Chile(3%):

- 14 articles (44%) involved writers-in-residence and /or healthcare professionals developing and facilitating writing workshops in healthcare and education settings
- 12 were purely descriptive articles, reports or general reviews of the field
- 6 other articles including 1 opinion piece, 1 conference paper, 3 commentary pieces, 1 narrative review

The literature was reviewed through the lens of reflective practice & creative writing pedagogy, and key findings included:

- Writing workshops took place in the workplace (i.e., the healthcare learning environment) in 50% of articles-primary care and hospitals,77% in GP practice; 50% took place in university settings
- with 62% of creative writing activities focusing on postgraduate healthcare professional learners
- The chart below indicates the percentage of the creative writing workshops lead by profession. It is interesting to see the majority of workshops were facilitated by doctors, and it great to see the **collaboration of writers and healthcare**

professionals facilitating workshops, in 24% of the articles.



Moreover, of the 13% of articles which involved interdisciplinary learners at all levels being participants ('the learners') in writing workshops, one article depicted **undergraduate healthcare students AND Creative Writing students writing together**, which is something I would love to develop with writers in education , for as the authors of that article put it : "*Literature and writing as a shared language to promote community service and education.*" [5]

The following chart shows that the majority of 'learners' in the writing workshops were medics:



Thematic analysis and open coding of the literature, revealed seven main themes which formed the basis for my ongoing personal and professional work using writing, to date:

- Creative writing in healthcare education settings can:
- Enhance empathy and compassion
 - Enhance communication skills-written and verbal
 - Maintain clinician well being
 - Contribute to professional development
 - Contribute to teamwork
 - Reflective practice
 - Foster creativity, sense of play

My conclusions were that:

- Creative writing (CW) contributes to personal and professional development of healthcare students and staff, in several ways as depicted above.
- The possible 'mechanisms' as to how writing may help healthcare professionals achieve the above, involve a combination of :
 - Creative writing pedagogy
 - Expressive writing pedagogy

5 Donohoe M and Danielson S (2004) "a community- based approach to the medical humanities', in Medical Education 38:204-217)

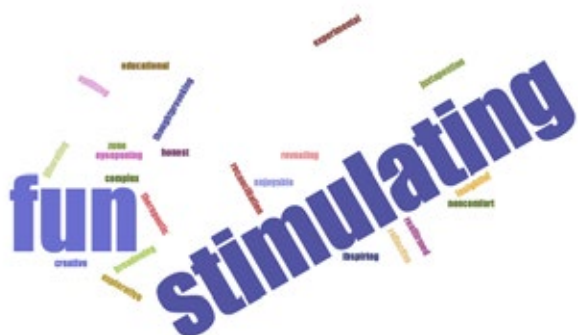
- Reflective writing pedagogy
- Workshops may be facilitated by writers and/or healthcare professionals and educators themselves, but collaboration and exchange of transferable skills should be explored for a rich, interdisciplinary team approach.

I then went onto present the two versions of my Special Study Modules [6] in Creative Writing for Personal and Professional development that I developed and ran for Year 1 medical students at Trinity College Dublin (TCD) and Year 3 medical students at Brighton & Sussex Medical School (BSMS).

With burnout and mental health issues being a major issue in the healthcare professions - clinical anxiety and depression are particularly prevalent in medical students, (and increasingly so now given the pressures and demands of the pandemic to NHS staff and trainees at all levels), I have long felt creative writing, alongside the established reflective writing in healthcare training, could be a low-cost, portable, enjoyable and easily integrated way that we can support ourselves and other peers, to articulate some of the experiences and emotions that otherwise go untold and unshared. This was a large factor for developing the SSM. My formal module aim was:

“to provide students with a workshop-based introduction to creative writing, giving students an easily accessible tool to explore their sense of self, their developing personal and professional identity as well as a means to explore their relationships and response to others, such as colleagues and patients, in the context of their training.”

I created an educational module and assessment rubric, whereby the writing group was a small group educational activity. I adapted the six week module and writing exercises for the Year 3 students at BSMS (eight week module), who were working on a daily basis as Year 3 is the first year of clinical training in hospitals and GP practices. Student reflections or as I call it, “Roshni’s Word Ward Round” on the last session of the module by BSMS Year 3 medical students:



Reflection/discussion points for delegates in my NAWE workshop

Of course not all of these points were covered in the timespan of the workshop, and I have added others afterwards as part of this article, and to keep the conversation going I hope, and I would love you as readers of this article to consider and share your thoughts with me:

- In my initial systematic review project of 2013, do the figures for who the facilitators of writing groups surprise you as writers/writer in healthcare/writers in healthcare education (from your stance as non-clinicians and as clinician-writer if you are one)?
- Are you surprised that the writing workshops in the systematic reviews most of them were facilitated by healthcare professionals and not writers/writers in education? Any thoughts or reservations re HCPS running workshops?
- What are your experiences/observations in the fields of writing in healthcare education, in healthcare, Arts in Health, Medical Humanities, Writing for Wellbeing, particularly over the recent years since the 2013 period of my study? Are things changing?
- Collaboration and Faculty development :
 - What support can HCPs offer to support Writers in healthcare and healthcare education for example, who may not be familiar with the unique and often not overt conditions in healthcare environment?
 - Who else can support us as writers and healthcare professionals in this endeavour? E.g. NAWE, LAPIDUS [7] and other organisations- which ones?

The journey continues...

I would love to hear your thoughts and ideas on this area, and perhaps in response to the questions above, and I am very keen to collaborate with writers, writer in education more to mutually support each other in this field, and perhaps create modules and projects that can mutually enrich the training of all our students, and us as educators and writers, in a truly interdisciplinary way.

Please feel free to contact me on contact form on my website Storied Selves, <http://storiedselves.com/>

ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

Dr Roshni Beeharry is a poet, writer, former NHS Consultant, Medical Educator and Creative Writing for Wellbeing Practitioner (<http://storiedselves.com/>), who integrates creative writing in her work with healthcare students and professionals. She holds an MA in Creative Writing & Personal Development, University of Surrey and MA in Clinical Education, IOE, London.

6 Special Study Modules were brought in to the medical undergraduate curriculum as part of the medical professional’s regulatory body the General Medical Council (GMC) reforms of 1993, *Tomorrow’s Doctors*, now in its fourth iteration as Outcomes for doctors in 2019 (www.gmc.or.uk/) These gave medical students an opportunity to study an area outside the core science-based curriculum for up to eight weeks, including, for the first time, literature and humanities subjects.

7 Lapidus International the main non accrediting body for Writing for Wellbeing practitioners www.lapidus.org.uk/

Writing Inside and Outside the Boxes

Amina Alyal and Oz Hardwick



In early Spring 2020, our lives were suddenly reduced to boxes on a screen, necessitating rapid adaptation to virtual communication. We have learned to work and socialise in isolation, sometimes monk-like, boxed into the four walls of a single room, prey to absent-mindedness of the most profound sort, as we look not at our surroundings but at places elsewhere and far away, or get lost in sometimes destructive rumination. Our mental health has suffered and amongst other things we have been encouraged to exercise mindfulness. In this essay, we want to think about ways in which our writing practices may have changed during the pandemic – not necessarily for the worst – and to suggest an activity for reintroducing elements of “In Real Life” experience into our virtual creative world. We believe that, although the pandemic may have been released like the ills from Pandora’s box into the world, as in the original story, hope is still there.

As the pandemic took hold, an article in *The New Yorker* (April 2020) by Rick Moody asked “Why Teaching Literary Arts over Zoom doesn’t quite work” – needing, as he says, “a classroom with bodies in it,” because writing is about “bearing witness” and “grappling with the complexities of another.” Many of us will be in sympathy with this view: neither of us had even heard of Zoom in mid-March 2020, whereas a week or so later, after a frantic weekend learning how to use it, we were delivering our first Zoom classes. We were nervous about showing our homes to students, and worried about how to engage them online. In fact, it worked very well, with overwhelmingly positive student feedback. Of course, not everything was satisfactory: even a year on, many students are still reluctant – or unable – to turn on

cameras, rendering sessions less personal, and following discussion purely in the Chat thread can sometimes be frustratingly slow and tiring, for all its positive attributes.

In other ways, though, some have really benefited from online learning. Online attendance and participation opens up accessibility to many who cannot leave the house or travel, because of disabilities, lack of funds, caring responsibilities, or other circumstances. As early as May 2020, students in a study at the University of Washington were expressing hope that aspects of online participation would remain in Higher Education after the pandemic for some of those reasons. Furthermore, in our isolation, we have paradoxically found ways of joining up with writers from further afield than is ever possible outside the virtual world, and have been able to pursue opportunities for collaboration, encouraging us to think outside the box.

As Nykopp, Mattunen and Erkens found in their pre-Covid, November 2018 article, collaboration between writing students online necessarily involves what they term “social” elements – commenting on each other’s work and so on. By October 2020, Rowana Miller writing on *Slate.com* is exploring the “richer” experience of Zoom chat which, while having some limitations as noted above, also allows for parallel discussions to take place, and for comments and questions to be noted and picked up by the facilitator at appropriate points in the discussion. It has always been difficult for some students to raise their hands in a real-life class, and this is one feature that may be useful to keep after we go back to meeting in person.

During the pandemic, many of us have had our writing really flourish – the writers of this article, for instance, amongst lots of other similar activities, have carried out online retreats with the *Writer’s HQ*, participated in Michael Loveday’s *Slouch to 5K* and taken part in Amanda White’s *Daily Haiku* group, in which she sets up a weekly *renga* we can all participate in. At the same time, as our mental health has suffered, we have been encouraged to practice mindfulness; to take in small things on our daily walks, for example. This is a conscious act of focused attention, recalling William Henry Davies’ oft-quoted poem “Leisure” (1914):

A poor life this if, full of care,
We have no time to stand and stare.

Kelly Moffatt in her article in *How to Respond in a*

Pandemic (ed. Ferrante and Caldeira) talks about the attentive focus one brings to reading poetry or writing poetry – and she likens it to meditation, or prayer; a whole engagement, a “slowing down when our minds are rushing forward in a haze of anxiety, confusion, and over-information. It involves a sudden attentiveness [...] an engaged contemplative practice” (Moffatt 2021: 58, 59). Moffatt compares the focused attention paid to individual words in reading or writing poetry to the mindfulness of observing objects around her on her daily walks. So, much like the monastic in their cell or cloister, we can sit in our rooms or follow our regular local walking routes, and meditate on the small things around us. These things can nourish both us and our creativity, sometimes providing concrete images as starting points for imaginative composition.

With these diverse issues in mind, we began to think about ways in which, as both writers and teachers of writing, we could take the best possibilities which arise through online communication and combine them with a mindful approach to the familiar, thereby refreshing creative practice. In thinking of bringing together these elements of our circumscribed lives, we were reminded of the self-styled Comte de Lautréamont’s (1846-1870) famous simile from *Les Chants de Maldoror* (1869): “As fair as ... the chance meeting of a sewing-machine and an umbrella on an operating table” (Lautréamont: 193). Championed by surrealist poet and theorist André Breton (1896-1966) in *Mad Love* (1937), his dizzying celebration of the marvellous in the everyday, this visual yet intriguingly imprecise simile – there are way more questions than answers in the image – has retained its power of delightful surprise long after the work from which it is taken has become largely forgotten. Its strength is multivalent but at its heart is the simple juxtaposition of objects that don’t belong together in a space which is home to neither.

Apart from the more readily observable effects of the pandemic over the past year, one thing that has diminished through consecutive periods of lockdown is a sense of surprise. Our worlds have become smaller, our routines more repetitive; and, concomitantly, we have found escape into the reassuringly familiar tropes of Netflix binges and the comforting nostalgia of old music. Patterns have become mundane as we have sat at screens and walked the same circuits and, because of this, we may have lost some of our opportunities to stumble upon those surprising juxtapositions which, even if they are not as strikingly odd as Lautréamont’s iconic example, form the tinder-boxes to ignite our creative processes.

While, as noted above, many of us have found our writing flourish during the past year of uncertainty, at the same time anecdotal evidence suggests that a great many writers have been struggling to write, and we suspect this reduced opportunity for stumbling across surprising juxtaposition may have a lot to do with it. Even as we sit at our screens, with the whole world and its wonders just a tap away, we are at a remove: everything is happening somewhere else. In considering this problematic separation of ourselves from the immediate, we recalled *The Futurist Cookbook* (1932) of Filippo Tommaso

Marinetti (1876-1944) and its witty celebration of the senses. Marinetti’s book is a playful mix of menu and manifesto for largely inedible food to be accompanied by prescribed perfumes, poetry, music, or even stroking squares of fabric or sandpaper while listening to the noise of an aircraft engine in the kitchen – while diners’ eyes, naturally, should be closed, the better to experience the bizarre repast (Marinetti: 95-6, 194 and 204). While we may not all have a handy aircraft in the kitchen, however, we do have things around us which can, if we let them, encroach upon our set routines and nudge us in unexpected directions.

In Rick Moody’s New Yorker article mentioned above, he characterises the challenge of online teaching in the arts as trying “to cause the humanness to shine through the ones and zeroes.” It is our belief that this humanness becomes tangible in surprise, in the tactile, and in anything that breaks through the quiet tyranny of the domestic, electronic, and psychological boxes in which we have found ourselves over the past year or so. Invoking Lautréamont (via Breton) and Marinetti, we devised the following online exercise to crack open the boxes and release the jacks within – an exercise we have run with our first year undergraduates on Microsoft Teams, and at the NAWA *What Next?* virtual conference on Zoom in March 2021, thereby drawing in writers with very different levels of experience.

As participants were readying themselves, we asked them to visualise a room they remembered that was not a domestic setting and was not their present environment, such as, for example, a classroom, a meeting room or office, or a waiting room. We explained that over the following twenty minutes we would be giving short phrases and words that we would like them to copy verbatim, between which we would offer prompts and instructions. We made it clear that nothing would be repeated, so if they misheard anything due to a poor signal, they should just use what they thought we might have said and carry on. Likewise, any ambiguities should be resolved how they thought best: the important thing is to incorporate any technical shortcomings – they are, after all, part of the experience of being in the moment – rather than let them interfere with the flow of writing. With one final injunction to remain open-minded and to not worry too much about making sense, we commenced. In what follows, underlined words were to be written down, while prompts are in brackets:

For a long time (choose an emotion)
was (the room you have pictured).
(Now, describe the light in the room. Do this by considering the quality of light in the room you are in now, and consider how it would look in your remembered room: really think about how it would strike surfaces, what it would highlight or hide).
I turned at the sound of a dropped (a small object near to you),
and there was (someone you can see a picture of – say a few words about them, focusing on one or two particular features)
They held a box the colour of (something you can see made out of natural materials – say a few words about it)

and, looking into my eyes, they told me that (take two texts from close at hand – they could be books, newspapers, receipts, leaflets, text messages, or anything – and pick a random phrase from each).

In the stillness that followed, I heard (sit in silence for a moment and write what can you hear).

As they offered the box to me, it smelled of (something close to you. Most things have a smell, however subtle, so hold something close and really focus on it),

and in my hand it felt like (something close to you – really think about the texture, temperature, and so on)

As I watched, the box opened by itself and inside was (the emotion you started with) and a picture of (a picture you can see – whether it’s a photograph, a print, or an item of packaging – as with texts, we’re surrounded by images).

I took my (emotion) and I stepped into the picture to the sound of (something you can see or hear from where you are that can make a noise but isn’t at the moment).

There, (specify a place in the picture), I saw (whatever the small object was that you heard drop earlier).

I stooped to pick it up but it was as heavy as (something you can see that’s heavy).

I closed my eyes and saw (close your eyes for a few moments – what do you see?).

All I could hear was (the last person you spoke to without a face covering),

reminding me that (your next appointment or deadline).

Their voice sounded like (something you saw last time you left the house).

We did not ask leading questions following either iteration of the exercise but invited any comments and reflections. More than half of the participants responded, with both groups overwhelmingly positive. “Fun” was the most commonly-used word, with short responses commenting in various ways upon the “comforting” guidance through the “twists and turns,” which offered a “really interesting way to engage” that “dusted away the cobwebs!” A number of the longer responses, however, reflected in greater depth on the experience and specifically its effect on the writer and their work. Most noted the “surprising things/details” which, as one respondent noted, “replicate chance encounters which happen outside, but in our own interior world” and, in turn, as another observed, “connect to memory, which is also something we’ve lost over the past year, or we’ve retreated into.”

Ultimately, it was a commonplace which perhaps summed up the exercise most succinctly, with one respondent saying that “it was really helpful for helping you think outside the box.” This more than anything is surely what writers need at present, a way of escaping the constraints of imposed boxes in which it has been so easy to become trapped. We believe that the reintroduction of surprise and conscious reconnection with the sensory, even to a small extent, is all it takes to break out, and responses to this exercise have confirmed that a group can be led into this realisation, even online.

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Action Learning Panel Discussion at the NAWE Conference

Fiona Lindsay

Panel Chair Fiona Mason (Co-Director of NAWE), facilitator Julia Payne (The Hub), presenter Suzanna Roland (set member), Fiona Lindsay (set member).

Our introductions came from Fiona Mason. She spoke about organising the Action Learning, peer coaching course from the National Association of Writers in Education. This online training was brought to us via the Hub's Julia Payne.

I welcomed the twenty-two Conference delegates (with several of our set members) and thanked NAWE for having us. To start, I shared a screenshot of the NAWE Action Learning Set from late 2020, which brought back fond memories of the six sessions of timely training.

Then, I reminded the delegates of my article "Writers In Education, Winter 2020 issue 82 - Action Learning Programme," which appeared on page 65. To summarise, there, I reported on the process of attending a new NAWE action learning set to help weather the ongoing pandemic storm. That is where set members develop new insights, plans and understanding to help fellow set members unlock their own insights. This timely group coaching taught us how to use open questions to help us tackle the big decisions ahead. I told how it was best to describe how peer coaching works by modelling it.

As a mock-up, I asked the panel to picture the usual scene of twice as many of us grouped around a table or via Zoom. Basically, the set report in on how they are doing, bringing our attention to any difficulties in their practice during a bidding process. That's when we decide who does what.

Julia spoke briefly about her experienced role as an Action Learning Programme Facilitator and how the action learning conversation illustration is more straightforward to model than explain. For the panel purposes, Julia facilitated our conversation, and Susanna ably took the presenter's role, explaining the issues around a random topic. This particular conversation was about her sister's birthday meal that night.

We all had the chance to ask clarifying questions such as, "What will make tonight a special night?"

Then, Julia activated an online spinner tool to generate open questions like what/where/why/when/how? Thus, we all tried to help resolve Susanna's issue.

We did this by asking clarifying questions to show off the power of open questions. We had less time than usual to show this process of just twenty minutes. Several open questions from us followed like,

What food and drink have you already got?

When will you do the first job towards tonight's celebration?

How else could you treat your sister?"

Susanna took time to answer the questions, explaining how she was busy at the conference and had little time to prepare a meal. This presenter was given time to conclude her own response and have light bulb moments from our prompts. That encourages the formulation of these actions from Susanna.

She reflected back that she could re-schedule her afternoon, order a takeout meal and concentrate on providing the cocktail drinks and organising the dancing!

Julia asked what Susanna was taking away from the session. Susanna said that she could listen to some of that afternoon's conference events later the next week, as they were available to listen to for quite a while. Also, she aimed to be better organised in future to allow an optimum work/life balance.

We reflected upon Susanna's calm approach, which helped her multi-task. And we acted as cheerleaders stressing the importance of having a social life.

Julia further explained the uses of Action Learning in various arts and commercial groups.

Fiona Mason asked us to define Action Learning. I responded that Action Rebel time nurtures my own writing, and I cherish the bonus of the wisdom from this new peer network. My new network has helped me gain a fantastic book review of my new collection. Also, during training, I presented about the process of applying for an Arts Council England grant. After a few attempts, I'm happy to say that perseverance paid off, and I start a new funded commissioned anthology project this April. That success came from the set boosting my confidence to keep applying via Grantium. Also, I gained the confidence to embark on another coaching contract.

When asked how the Action Rebel set has been adapted, we shared how our monthly meetings are shorter with activities to develop our own practice built-in. We seven are taking turns to lead the sessions and producing exercises to spark new writing.

The NAWE set renamed themselves as Action Rebels. The NAWE set has evolved into this supportive virtual writers' bubble. With us all having less time, our present arrangement is more applicable to this set to allow time for nurturing our own writing as well as facilitating a couple of conversations.

The fellow Action Rebel set member Suzanna Roland's feedback:

"I enjoyed being part of the panel (despite feeling quite ill after Covid jab the day before!) I thought it was interesting to use a non-work example. It made the session fun and accessible whilst showing the techniques and possibilities of action learning. Overall I enjoyed the conference and spending time with other writers, even if it was online!"

My feedback is that I found the panel discussion fascinating to host, and acknowledge the expert guidance of Julia was essential to make the discussion work realistically. Thus, I very much appreciated the support of the entire panel

I-2-I Sessions

Upclose Editing

Shelagh Weeks

The members of the upclose-editing and mentoring team (<https://www.upclose-editing.com>) offered free mentoring sessions for twelve NAWE members during this year's online conference. Writers sent approximately 2,500 words for us to read in advance and for us to give feedback on and discuss. When we had overcome the initial IT and Zoom complications (often to do with unstable network connections), we agreed that the whole process had been a thoroughly enjoyable experience, especially engaging with writers in this tailored and focussed space. Attending the conference both as contributors and attendees made the two days more interactive and meaningful, and as a team it felt rewarding to step outside of our normal business mode and to work for free. Reading such a collection of disparate work, it was interesting to match the voice and/or face with the writing voice. It was also interesting to engage in a colloquy with fellow members of NAWE while trying to efficiently deliver feedback in a tight twenty-minute slot. Our conversations ranged across a complex matrix of issues to do with ideas, structures, themes, language, characterisation, specificity – and that ever-thorny subject, getting an agent. Several of the NAWE conference members whom we talked to were already published, some were PhD students, and others were just launching into the business of writing seriously (even if their work was humorous) and tackling that slippery beast - the contemporary novel.

We would like to offer this sort of event again, perhaps working with young, or disadvantaged writers, perhaps as contributors at next year's NAWE conference, whether online or face-to-face. Having attended many NAWE conferences in the past, having offered many teaching sessions and having been a member of the HE committee,

I found this year's event strangely liberating. I was less exhausted, more relaxed, more focussed and surprisingly, more productive. I hope those that we engaged with felt the same and had as much fun as we did.

Our questionnaire feedback suggested that our sessions were indeed useful. Here are some of the comments:

'Getting a professional opinion on the story and its voice was especially useful... a close reading of the text and generous insights into its nuances and where these could be more clearly brought out.'

'The advice on editing the prologue, and the advice on the English-speaking publishing marketwas extremely helpful and I appreciate it a lot!'

'Suggestions about booking in at sessions with individual agents run at writing festivals was helpful, as well as checking out querying hashtags also to establish more clearly for myself who my target audience is.'

'It was really helpful having someone fresh to look at the beginning of my manuscript as I prepare it for submission.'

'Your help was invaluable.'

Wonderful!'

Writing Historical Fiction:

The distant past, the recent past, and
the future with an eye on the past

Claire Gradidge, Lisa Koning & Andrew Melrose

'Why are we so attached to the severities of the past? Why are we so proud of having endured our fathers and our mothers, the fireless days and the meatless days, the cold winters and the sharp tongues? It's not as if we had a choice,' said Hilary Mantel when talking about Wolf Hall. Writing historical fiction is by its very nature problematic. Not because of the facts history provides but because of, as Mantel also said, 'the absence of facts that frightens people: the gap you open, into which they pour their fears, fantasies, desires.' Our conception of reality depends on the socio-culturally lived experiences which inform our daily lives. Intrinsic to this is the historical past which has brought us here. In *The Go-Between*, L.P. Hartley said, 'The past is a foreign country they do things differently there...' and yet the people who populate that foreign country are no different from you or us, except they are informed but a different sense of culture and experience and of course their own history. We, three writers/academics, discuss their own novels set in the **distant past**, the **near past** and the **historical future**, talking about how factual events and creative imagination collide into a story worth telling about people.

requires equal research and invention, to construct the historicity of characters, settings and events believable to the reader. I was dealing with a period set over 450 years ago, where conclusive facts and verifiable truths are thin on the ground. What information remained was often recorded by those with a vested interest and produced for a particular purpose, such as moral advice or political gain. Therefore, the veracity of contemporary accounts is challenging. Any details uncovered can be questionable in authenticity, often revealing conflict between different sources and containing large gaps. *The Education of a Christian Woman*, a sixteenth century manual by Juan Luis Vives, offers advice on how an honourable woman should behave. However, it was written by a man for well-educated men; whether this was how all women behaved, or if they agreed, cannot be assumed. Writers such as Rabelais, Montaigne, Shakespeare, and Karel van Mander, are other sources I have turned to in order to get a broad picture. And this was a deliberate strategy. The writer of historical fiction must be a creative inventor using the tools to hand. Such as with Hilary Mantel and her novels on Thomas Cromwell demonstrate: the Seymours and the Boleyns may have told his story differently from each other but Mantel's job was to deliver a believable consensus.

Yet such invention comes with inherent boundaries. We are dealing with real periods of history with known facts (or perceived as such). The art of this invention reaches its greatest potential when it constructs a world that the reader *feels* is real. This realness can be difficult to identify or define, but it is when the reader senses authenticity. They know the story is a work of fiction and accept it may not be factual, but it is recognisable from a historical perspective. If we accept that the writer of fiction can also be an inventor, there still lies the dilemma of how to deal with history effectively for the discerning reader. From my own literary research, it would seem there is no correct approach to take, merely examples that can be followed. Some writers have taken a real event and with artistic treatment transcended the truth, often claiming to give it a truer, deeper reality. Others are doggedly faithful to what factual information remains. Regardless of where a writer stands on how they wish to deal with history, what is apparent is that, regardless of how history is used, it is complicated.

In my case, I was working with paintings depicting scenes from sixteenth century Flanders. Such as with this painting, entitled *Peasant Dance*, on first glance it would appear to provide us with an image of everyday people



The joy of historical fiction is that it can take the reader back in time, to another period and place. My novel - *The Keeper of Seven Secrets* - is set in sixteenth-century Antwerp, with the aim of bringing to life in words, a world depicted by Pieter Bruegel the Elder. It is not a story about the painter himself, but a fictional narrative set in his world containing themes suggested in his work.

But, like most writers of historical fiction, I faced the challenge of recreating a world that is both familiar yet strange and unknown. This creative undertaking

enjoying themselves. But as I found to be most typical of Bruegel – all is not what it seems – and while he suggests much, he gives away very little.

Let's look a little closer...



Pieter Bruegel the Elder, *The Peasant Dance*, 1567

Beneath this woman here is a jug handle, perhaps referring to a sixteenth century idea of the jug representing virtue, or in her case, broken virtue. And as for her pretty dress? Actually, a woman wearing yellow at this time was synonymous with prostitution. And it doesn't end there – from her dress hangs keys – indicating she has property – and a purse full of money. It would seem Bruegel has much to imply about her. And as for her partner, numerous art historians have debated over what might be going on with his legs which are certainly in an odd position.

I could keep going, revealing so much more within this one painting, but my aim was simply to highlight some examples of my challenge.

In 1962 György Lukács said,

What matters therefore in the historical novel is not the retelling of great historical events, but the poetic awakening of the people who figured in those events. What matters is that we should re-experience the social and human motives which led men to think, feel and act just as they did in historical reality.

The journey of my novel began with the compelling world of Carnival, specifically pre-seventeenth century, that stood out. A world that was turned up-side-down, taking place outside the normal rules that governed society; a time of celebration, play and excess. It was a moment when everything was permitted, bordering between art and life, a performance with no boundaries between performers and audience. It offered the potential for new perspectives, new order, by showing the relative nature of all that exists. But importantly once Carnival was over, everything returned back to the 'old' ways. I was hooked and to use a writer's term, I hoped it would hook my reader.

Researching Carnival led to the time period for the novel: mid sixteenth century, a fascinating yet turbulent era in history, with much taking place from social, cultural, artistic, economical and religious perspectives. Major

events are easily uncovered, but details, such as how common people lived, is less well documented. But there are paintings, and a very rich and engaging world depicted by Bruegel.

Going back to Lukács' advice – I set about understanding society: what people did, why they did it, and what kept them awake at night. I began with books, reading everything I could find out about the painter and his work. But I wanted to experience Bruegel's work and stand before them, to see the details for myself, and I was fortunate to see his paintings in Brussels, Antwerp, Vienna and Bath. The *Once in A Lifetime* exhibition at the Kunsthistorisches Museum provided insight into the detail contained within his work. Other artist interpretations of Bruegel's work have also been influential. *Młyn i krzyż* (The Mill and the Cross), a 2011 film by Lech Majewski is an ekphrastic interpretation of another of Bruegel's paintings.

The premise behind *The Keeper of Seven Secrets* began with Bruegel's *Nederlandish Proverbs*, or *The Blue Cloak*. There is a wealth of information in this painting, but it is the couple in the centre that captured my interest.

She wears a daring red dress, no headpiece, unlike the other women in the painting. She's young; not so the man she is embracing. He's stooped and walks with a stick. A long hood covers his face, and he has a greying beard. The proverb goes, "She hangs over her husband the blue cloak, deceiving him" and in Dutch, the saying still exists today: to be wrapped in a blue cloak is to be deceived. The couple are in fact, a cuckold and his dishonest wife; an interesting parallel with the ideal of Carnival and renewal and 'out with the old and in with the new.'



There are numerous references in Bruegel's work to cuckoldry, suggesting that it was something more than just a rare occurrence. Such as the couple's placement within this painting, and also the choice of a bright blue colour for the man's cloak. In Bruegel's painting *Children's Games*, there is a young girl leading a boy who wears a blue cloak. It would seem that Bruegel believes a woman's capacity to deceive a man, starts at a very young age.

My research began to uncover a complex relationship, beyond a simple act of adultery. Such as the quote by St Jerome (c. 320-420) "Woman is the root of all evil", the concept of the dishonest woman has existed for a very long time, even going back to Eve in the Old Testament. My research uncovered numerous instructions written by and for learned men of the time, teaching how to lead honourable lives. For example, Joseph Swetnam advised in 1615 that: women have a thousand ways to entice thee and ten thousand ways to deceive. It would seem, that

A similar issue of identification as key to solving a murder was at the heart of my novel: once the victim is known, the trail leads inexorably to the killer.

While the plot and characters of my novel were fictitious, the setting was as true as I could make it. Sources such as Mass Observation diaries, local history holdings and published histories of life on the Home Front served to underpin my work.

Myths persist that WWII was a time when 'everyone pulled together' but I felt it was important that I also represented darker aspects of life in small town England: attitudes towards sexual behaviour and illegitimacy, social class, and issues like anti-semitism. These gave me real-life motives for my characters, and for the murder. Then, as now, murder is a heinous crime, and not something which could be presented as a bloodless puzzle to solve.

In early 2018, once my PhD was granted, I set out to discover whether my novel might be commercially viable. By chance, I came across the details of the Richard & Judy 'Search for a Bestseller' competition. Without any real expectation of winning, I entered, and was amazed – and delighted – when in January 2019, I discovered I'd won.

That first book was published in August 2019, and two more novels in the series were commissioned. The second is to be published in October 2020 under the title *Treachery at Hursley Park House*, and I have just started work on the third.



I'm writing a novel at the moment which is set in the present with the past as a huge influence. Jacques Derrida wrote that the 'future, this beyond, is not another time, a day after history. It is present at the heart of experience. Present not as a total presence but as a trace ...' (Derrida 1978: 95). That trace is the collection of experience we gather as we walk in present time, with a future in mind. Writing the novel is a long process and in between I have written and published a couple of things, using the material I have located, which I am going to talk about here. Because what I have found in creating the small peripheral projects – namely a loose memoir and a collection of songs <https://andymelrose.bandcamp.com/album/fisherrow> - is they have relied a great deal on two significant factors, analepsis and prolepsis.

Let me explain what I mean.

Analepsis: looking back, not as a flashback, like the kind you get in a story; not as a historical story like the one's Lisa and Claire have been talking about either, but as something which is part of me and exists as an echo of my past as I negotiate an uncertain future, and an uncertain way of addressing that uncertain future. But it's also an echo of a shared past, the shared past, the historical and cultural past I have with others, which influences the "now" of anything I write, the now of the story, the now of the poem which allows me to anticipate the future. The history of experience which makes us all, dictates how we got here, who we are and what we write. But because of world events (in this case the coronavirus pandemic, though it could be war, famine and so on) it is a future is less knowable than it was before the present crisis began.

But in considering this analepsis idea we can also think about:

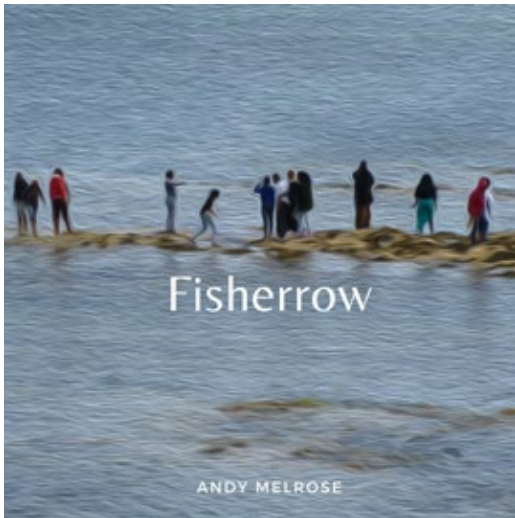
Prolepsis: the projection from the present because with the benefit of experiential hindsight – though the 'present' has a way of disrupting the ever same nature of the past. As I have already said, the future is no longer what we thought it was. The future from January 2020 isn't the same as the one we are currently viewing in early 2021. Prolepsis then, is essentially our vision of the future from the position of the now, with the benefit of hindsight, which may or may not be useful.

However, for me at least, this idea of writing the future with an eye on the past has two registers. The first of these is the exterior, the physical, factual and historical truth, such as that which writers of historical fiction give us – which Lisa and Claire discussed above. But the second is the internal, knowable, emotional, philosophical and thoughtful engagement. The poetics of life, if you will. We, all of us have an inner voice, but none of us ever really know what's going on inside the head of others. So the writer's job is to place themselves into the head of characters with a credible dialogue and thought process built on their own, learned and vicarious experience. So using prolepsis with analepsis as a projection of the future from the present, with the benefit of past experience, is useful. It's where and what we think the future (even tomorrow) will be, as informed by our past experience while reflecting from the 'now' of our own story. Let me give a light-hearted example.

Carol King singing, 'will you still love me tomorrow' isn't really a question but a rhetorical hope that you will. Analepsis, takes us back to the experience of what went before but which impacts on the 'now'. Previous broken love affairs, heartbreak, young love, all the accumulated speedbumps in our life's journey bring us to who we are, and Carol King singing, will you still love me tomorrow, is aligned to the simple fact that past experience says while I hope so, it is possible you will not. Historical experience tells us this is so, even vicarious experience,

allows for that. But that song brings me to the idea of how we experience history and how it becomes part of our cultural DNA.

Writing a single narrative across different codes



I like to write across codes and genre, and in writing *Fisherrow* – which is a CD and a book, a collection of poems, prose, pictures, lyrics and songs - my past informs the narrative journey as I reach out in the present to where I am going in the future. The whole *Fisherrow* project is infused with this idea and its only now, after looking back at it, I can see the project isn't about nostalgia but hope for the future, and the wordplay around the different narrative codes isn't playful dipping in here and there but actually a voice finding spaces in which to speak. Crossing the narrative codes through poetry, prose, pictures and lyrical content allows a broad brush to bring poetics to the ideas I wanted to explore. The echoes of place, of music, of sound, of people, of a sense of self I recorded were my own thoughts distilled into a story. Their ever presence are the continuities we carry with us through our lives.



This is what I mean in my analepsis then. The echoes of my own past, my own history, my own cultural engagement, which shape the story of my now. In many ways it is my Scottishness, though I haven't lived there for over 40 years. It's my homeliness if I was ever to say where I was going back to, and yet forty years after

leaving it offers a familiar strangeness which I have to write into my future because it's a part of me. Indeed it is my historical imprint. Thus as writers, each of us dredge our own echoes, we can see how the story of experience can be influenced by personal experience without being biographical – as opposed to the vicarious experience and research implicit in historical fiction. But even in historical fiction what it does is allow us to see into the inner life of our characters. The past may seem like it is a foreign country but actually they don't do things a lot differently there. They live and love and hope and dream just as we do – only they have a different sense of their own history and cultural experience.

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Dr Claire Gradidge has a Doctorate in Creative Writing. She has lectured in the subject since 2012, as well as mentoring and teaching in Adult Education. She has previously had short fiction and poetry published. Her first novel, *The Unexpected Return of Josephine Fox*, is a historical crime fiction set in Hampshire in WWII. It won the Richard and Judy Search for a Bestseller competition and was published in August 2019. She is currently working on a sequel.

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Prof Andrew Melrose is Emeritus Professor of Writing at the University of Winchester, UK. He has over 150 films, fiction, nonfiction, research, songs, poems and other writing credits, including 33 scholarly or creative books. He is currently working on *The Boat*, an extended poem, book and exhibition about people migrating to safer countries on boats.

Post Covid-19, can community writing have its cake and eat it?

Jane Moss

Jane Moss reflects on the impact of lockdown on community writing groups and their facilitators, with some silver linings and ideas for future practice drawn from lively discussion in Zoom breakout rooms during the Elephant in the Zoom conference session. This article draws on insights and suggestions shared by participants in that session, with acknowledgments and thanks.

Seeing the full house for *The Elephant in the Zoom* session I hosted at the start of the NAWC Conference was like meeting up with my lost tribe after the year of lockdown. Those of us who practice in community settings peered at each other from our Zoom windows. Several of us were in our garden offices and sheds, built or adapted in the past year to give us somewhere - anywhere - in which to work once community venues and local spaces were no longer available.

The session was an opportunity to explore with fellow practitioners what I call the 'elephant in the Zoom': the experiences we have had little chance to speak about together since lockdown changed the way we work, and the unforeseen challenges as well as the benefits we discovered as we navigated the enforced digital away of working. Above all, the elephant is the question about how we now move forward into a future of blended practice, a mix of digital and traditional methods, and ensure that no one is left behind. I have been acutely aware since March 2020 of the people unable to join in online, because of resources, skills, or personal preference. I want to see them again and understand how I can adapt my work to accommodate everyone.

I set the scene for our discussion by describing a community writing group in a rural and coastal area of Cornwall, where I live and work. In normal times, the writing group's strong social element is expressed by meeting in familiar community venues: a village hall, a local café, outdoor spaces including a community garden and an orchard, and occasionally a quiet corner of the village pub or somebody's house. None of these were possible from 23 March 2020 so we resorted to Zoom. Immediately we missed some regular participants who were unable to join in. Lack of laptops or smartphones, or the skills and confidence to use them in unfamiliar ways, or even at all in a couple of cases, were the barriers to be overcome. Some have never made it back and some have chosen to wait until we can do it 'properly', as they call it.

I noticed a new element to my facilitator role: IT coach

and trouble shooter for those who had never used their laptop or phone for more than calls and texts. We all missed the sociability tea and cake during a writing session, the spontaneity of conversation, the creative riffing off each other as creative ideas are shared, and the sense of community engendered by a group gathered around the same table. Although Zoom provided its own intimacy and sense of gathering, it was not the same.

Many of us, it seems, are now considering how to re-adapt to post-lockdown life. Do we continue online, with the national and even international reach some of us have discovered? Do we revert to real places, or do we devise a more agile and blended way of working in which participants can engage through their preferred platform, digital or actual? A question about workload occurs to me: how to manage the prospect of running certain events twice, online and real, and how to ensure that what I do is inclusive and accessible. There have been gains and losses in the move to digital platforms: better accessibility for the house bound and those with limited mobility, but exclusion for those who lack the ability or inclination to take part online. The ease of simply dialling into Zoom represents a welcome reduction of workload for those of us used to setting up meeting rooms, arranging refreshments, and factoring in travel time and expenses. But the quality of the participatory experience is qualified.

Discussion in the conference session produced a rich array of experiences and ideas, generously shared. There seem to me to be three categories to be considered for future community writing practice:

1. The benefits of online facilitation
2. Some drawbacks
3. Messages to the future: tips for new ways of working

1. The benefits of online facilitation

- Suddenly, our reach is global. We can connect with people from around the world and hear different perspectives
- For many, it is more accessible: no need for travel or accessible buildings
- Zoom does create a sense of community and at least we can still meet
- We discover breakout rooms: intimate spaces for sharing
- Screen sharing works perfectly for writing groups. Indeed it might have been made for us as writers

- Some of us working in schools find we can deliver sessions to more than one class at a time, so schools get more from the day
- Many of us find we have more time and fewer overheads
- As we get used to it, there is a real sense of trust in a Zoom group
- Under lockdown, the ability to keep going and meet regularly online gives people much-needed routine and structure
- People enjoy joining in from the comfort of home and we get to know each other in a different way when we see our individual contexts
- As we experiment, we start to find creative ways to work on Zoom: using the chat thread for relay writing, introducing visual and audio material, and encouraging people to use their own devices to share material on screen
- Participants who lack confidence to begin with gradually adjust and become more digitally confident

2. Some drawbacks

- We miss the conviviality of the live writing group in a real space; the chat, the spontaneity and the cake
- Practitioners in schools point out that most schools don't have permission to show children on screen. Delivering sessions to blank screens with videos off is difficult
- As well as lack of confidence or desire to join in digitally, some people have caring responsibilities at home which make it hard for them to participate
- After a day of work-from-home Zooming or home schooling, the last thing some people want to do is join another Zoom session for a writing group
- There is facilitator Zoom-fatigue, as one session follows another. Too much screen time is tiring in a way that real events are not. Eyesight and posture suffer
- We have to work to engage everyone and optimum group size is a question. Anything up to about 15 is manageable in terms of all voices being heard, but larger than that means some stay in their isolated Zoom windows, unheard
- We might not want people to see our own home context: boundaries need to be respected in online practice
- Without clear instruction at the start people will turn their videos off. Being muted helps sounds quality but blank screens diminish the sense of community
- We can't feel the energy in the room. Body language is hard to read, and private conversations in breaks or afterwards are impossible
- Dodgy wifi and lost connections are unwelcome interruptions to the flow

3. Messages to the future: tips for new ways of working

- The good news is we can keep working online if we have to
- You can still enjoy the cake, but you have to bring your own
- A wifi booster is a good investment
- Future forms of blended practice could see mixed

groups participating in real spaces and online, and continuing to meet via Zoom after or in addition to live workshops

- We want to carry on reaching global audiences
- There is a role for libraries who can help train and support people to get online
- There are benefits to finding a collaborator; working with a co-host who can help manage larger numbers and co-pilot the Zoom room
- We must keep using our community spaces. They need us back and our communities need the social contact in familiar safe spaces
- The most successful digital workshops find ways to vary the programme with a mix of activities and breaks to reduce the amount of passive screen time
- Some of us are trying out other sharing platforms: Slack and Trello, also Seesaw, MeWe and Facebook Rooms
- There's a need for some Zoom ground rules and agreed etiquette, which can be suggested or elicited from a group: for example starting with some technical housekeeping to make sure everyone is familiar with the tools of muting and unmuting; asking for videos to be on unless there is good reason; agreeing whether or not to use the chat thread; agreeing how to attract attention, whether with a physically raised hand or the digital symbol; letting people know it's alright to come back in via the same link if they fall out of the session
- Regular breaks to rest eyes and move around help maintain concentration for facilitators and participants. Screen breaks every half hour or so seem to work well
- After a workshop allow yourself some down time with fresh air
- Invite people to bring their own beverages and cake for a longer break midway, or to hang back at the end for a chat. Even on Zoom, some sort of social interaction can be achieved if it is planned into the time.

Did we think of everything? Probably not, but this is a conversation that will continue among us as we head out of lockdown (hopefully never to return). How blended is the future? Can we have our cake and eat it, digitally and in the real world of community practice? Let's think about it and keep sharing inspiration.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

Jane Moss lives in Cornwall. She is a full time writer and facilitator of community writing groups and creative writing retreats. She has hosted writing groups for Princess Alice Hospice, Surbiton Library, Kingston Carers Association, Macmillan, Helston Museum, Cornwall Counsellors Network, Cornwall Scope, St Agnes Miners and Mechanics Institute, and Tremayne Hall community centre near Falmouth. She is co-host of www.thewritingretreat.co.uk, a Paper Nations Channel Partner, a member of Lapidus, and a member of NAWE's Community Writing sub-committee. Jane's PhD on the novel as a vehicle for community participation is funded by AHRC at Falmouth University. www.janemoss.com.

Mindfulness Meditation for Writers

Kylie Holmes

For most of my life, I've been occupied with different forms of writing, which can sometimes be difficult to maintain. The reason for this is that I've allowed distractions to consume me, and I get caught up with the drama of life.

Have you ever driven somewhere and can't remember how you got there? Have you walked into a room and suddenly realised that you have no recall as to why? Or perhaps you absent-mindedly ate your lunch and can barely remember the taste, or even that final mouthful. You were distracted, perhaps still working at the time, watching television, or reading. Nowadays, people find it increasingly difficult to appreciate stillness.

Have you considered incorporating mindfulness and meditation into your life? Meditation is scientifically proven to improve concentration, which can assist you with your creative writing. Meditation can bring clarity into your daily living, whilst mindfulness quenches every writer's longing to expand and express their creative selves.

When people think of meditation, a picture may form in their mind of cheesy new age music, with people chanting 'Om'. I've been using meditation and mindfulness on and off for 30 years. I returned to these practices in March 2016. This is because my ex-husband was working in the Ivory Coast. He was at a beachside bar before gunman launched a shooting rampage that left at least 18 people dead. A horrific wave of panic ensued my whole being. That night my mind was trapped in cycles of worry as I sat up and watched the news as I desperately tried to reach him. Thankfully, he was not hurt, but some of his friends lost their lives.

In the early hours of that morning, I retreated to bed, exhausted, armed with my iPad. I began to feel a heavy sense of dread and nausea rising so I found some meditation music to help me get to sleep. Some place, deep inside my being, connected to inner peace. I turned to meditation and mindfulness because I wanted to reduce the amount of stress in my life, especially with my ex-husband working away from home. My four children were picking up my stresses which I felt was unfair to them. I longed for greater peace of mind and began searching for new meaning in life and I was also simply looking to increase my own sense of happiness. I also carried out extensive research in finding a structured meditation and mindfulness course to refresh my training.

Frustrations

When the courses arrived, I stopped practising meditation and mindfulness and I don't know why. In the early days, I did become more annoyed with myself if I didn't do my meditation. Despite all the experience I have had in 30 years, I assumed that the exercises automatically brought me inner peace, but it made me cranky for a number of reasons. My mind just kept wandering, the mind chatter was manic, and I began to think I just wasn't the kind of person who could meditate. My first attempts at any kind made me more stressed and anxious than I usually am.

Even though this was normal, I did go through a stage of obsession with 'getting it right'. I put a lot of pressure on myself, and instead of being calm, I became cantankerous with myself and others. I had forgotten that one of the biggest misconceptions about meditation is that I am not allowed to have thoughts flying around in my mind. The more I forcefully tried to let go of my manic thoughts, the more they increased! By learning from the beginning again, I understood that I can't stop my thoughts. I just noticed the thoughts without attaching to them or judging them. By the end of the first month, something just clicked. I had stopped trying to stomp my thoughts out and instead I just let them flow freely as I concentrated on my breath. My breath became my anchor and the first time I noticed I had done this successfully was when I looked at the clock feeling that only five minutes had passed. In actuality, 20 minutes had gone by.

During the first month I felt sleepy after meditation. By the second month I felt more alert afterwards. When the third month arrived, I felt more focused during the day. I drank fewer cups of tea, turned to water and when I started doing guided visualisations and meditations, I really found them relaxing. I felt less rushed with my life and more confident in dealing with what life threw at me.

I felt the more I practiced meditation I was less bogged down by the many things on my mind. With mindfulness, I began to live fully in the present moment. I looked forward to my twice daily ritual in easing the anxiety and stress.

My next goal was to apply these skills to assist me with my creative writing degree. I begin with gentle introductions to make 'writing' simpler, more productive, and much more enjoyable. I found that instead of demanding myself that I reach a target, I asked myself, 'what topics I would like to write about?'. I've learnt that

being mindful is much more than an action or a state of mind, it is a way of life. From experience, I've learned to stay in the present moment, giving full attention to the task at hand. But too often we focus on the future or on the past and we forget to simply be.

Being Good Enough

As a writer, I strive to do well. If, like me, you've been knocked by others about the quality of your writing and have held on to the false belief that you're not good enough, it can be hard to kick-start positivity into your life.

The following tips may be simple, but they are very effective:

Find a quiet spot so you can relax. This can be a room in your house, a place in your garden or secluded spot in your local park. It doesn't matter where it is, providing it gives you some privacy and it appeals to you. Get out your notepad and pen or even laptop and simply ask yourself this question: 'How can I let go of limiting beliefs?' For 20 minutes, allow yourself to free write whatever comes to you.

Regular Practice

Regular practice is more important than overdoing it initially. Use mindfulness at the key times of the day when you feel stressed, or when you need to calm your nerves or simply to find a little peace in a frantic life. It's very tempting to rush headlong into new behaviours but slowly, and steadily and frequently is the key to success.

Find time in your busy schedule

Circle it on your calendar, put a reminder on your mobile phone and give priority to your mindfulness writing practice. It can be very easy to forget or to run out of time, even more so if your life is spiralling out of control with day-to-day demands. Put notes up in strategic places around your home or at work. This will naturally bring your thoughts back to the present.

Mindful Walking

Practice a walking meditation. Feel the rhythm of each movement, feel the soles of your feet as they make contact with the ground, loosen your shoulders, shake out any tension, feel the breath coming in and out of your lungs and consider what it feels like to be alive. Note the scenery around you - the colour of the sky, the trees, listening to the sounds of birds or the rumble of traffic. Be aware of it all. Where ever you are, you can still be mindful.

Live in the present

It's easy to live in the past and get caught up with remembering when writing didn't work and think about when writing didn't go very well. Why not sit down at your writing place and think about a place you have observed recently and, as if you were still there, start to write what you see? Don't analyse your writing and let your mind decide what to write and what to let go.

Appreciate what you have

You may be totally focused on striving purposefully towards your writing goals, but don't forget the simple things in life. Irrespective of your personal objectives, mindfulness will help you to achieve your goals, providing your mind stays fixed in the present, focusing on life as it unfolds. Whether the day is a good or bad one, you will have lived it to the full and that means something. Take time to appreciate your health, the weather, hearing birds singing and the weather.

Embrace your emotions

When you are feeling flat and are experiencing a variety of life challenges that tests your patience, the last thing you think about is living in that moment. From my own experience, emotions are incredibly strong, and they can be overwhelming in their intensity. Emotions are fleeting as they have a starting point, a middle and an ending. At that moment in time, it may seem overwhelming but if you say to yourself, 'this soon will pass', it will help not to bottle up the emotions. It is far better to experience the emotions, observe them, understand them and free those emotions with kindness.

Be aware of your thoughts

Again, from my own understanding, negative thoughts can be destructive which may lead to self-sabotaging your life. When we don't live in the moment, we don't realise our thoughts are caustic. During your times of mindfulness, tune in on those thoughts. If they are intense, try not to allow the thoughts to overwhelm you.

As little as 10 minutes of mindfulness and meditation a day can help you reap great benefits for your writing. From my own experience, the 'best' meditation is the meditation that works for you, at this stage of your writing life. I've used meditation combined with mindfulness techniques to help my concentration and to build my confidence in writing in various genres. Mindfulness and Meditation can assist you with procrastination, self-sabotage and self-criticism and is the easiest way for many writers facing to overcome 'writer's block'.

New to meditation?

Here are some easy steps to get you started

Prepare yourself by finding a comfortable position in which to rest, and take a few deep breaths. Breathe out all tension, and negativity and breathe in patience and kindness. Let go of thoughts, feelings and tensions stored in your mind, body, spirit.

Feel the earth beneath your feet and take three gentle cleansing breaths. Keep your feet on the floor, so that you're grounded. Visualise them like the roots of a tree coming down from the soles of your feet.

With each breath, allow your roots to go even deeper, through fresh, underground springs and deep-water tables.

Just allow your eyelids to close ... and relax your mind by thinking of something pleasant ... try to let go of any

negative thoughts which come into your mind. Visualise them as beautiful bubbles floating up into the atmosphere and gently disperse into the universe.

Relax even more deeply. Imagine, sense, or visualise a white light in front of you, surrounding you and consuming all your lower vibrations. Allow any negativity to pass into the flame.

(pause for two minutes)

Imagine, sense, or visualise yourself floating in a sea, lake or outdoor swimming pool. Allow the gentle water to support you and feel the warmth of the sun on your face. Listen to the whispers of the muse giving you bursts of inspiration, new ideas, and boosts of self-confidence.

(pause for five minutes)

It is now time to return to the present day. Make your journey back into your body. Bring your awareness back to your breath. Feel you're in and out breaths as

they continue to move through and around your body... Feel your hands, arms, feet, legs, your head, your mind, your heart and let your breath guide you back to a full conscious awareness of yourself. and open your eyes.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

Kylie Holmes is a Hypnotherapist, Meditation Mindfulness teacher. She is also a writer, author of 2 children's book and 3 spiritual books. Kylie teaches meditation mindfulness to children and adults of all ages. Dyslexia has proven to be a challenge to Kylie, but then so did learning how to drive a car! Her favourite jobs include inspiring children and adults to discover their writing passions and being a mum to her four children Jade, Amba, Leo and Ruby.

Ethics and Life Writing – Other Mothers

Shanta Everington

Patrick Wright and Shanta Everington, Creative Writing PhD students at The Open University, co-presented on the ethical considerations involved in their life writing projects.

Shanta talked about her PhD work-in-progress, *Other Mothers*, a life writing hybrid form combining interview material, poetry, fiction, personal essay and collage, curating and creating women's stories of adoption, surrogacy and egg donation. This paper opens up debates around the ethical issues of representing others in life writing.

What do you think of when you imagine a 'mother-to-be'? Is it a woman in skinny jeans checking her phone to hear if her surrogate has gone into labour? Is it a woman answering a social worker's questions as she is assessed for her suitability to adopt? Contemporary explorations of motherhood in life writing have, with a few notable exceptions, primarily focused on the biological mother raising the child she gave birth to. There is a dearth of life writing by and about women who have become mothers through the routes of adoption, surrogacy and egg donation, and their silent partners – the birth mothers, surrogate mothers and egg donors – who have made motherhood possible for them, sometimes at a personal cost. Inspired by my personal experience as a biological

and adoptive mother, my PhD project seeks to address this gap. The thesis comprises a book-length piece of life writing, *Other Mothers*, and a critical commentary, *Curating and Creating: Voices of adoption, egg donation and surrogacy* exploring the methodological, ethical and artistic considerations involved in a transforming life into literature.

I interviewed six mothers to obtain their stories: Alison, a mother via egg donation and adoption; Charlotte, an egg donor whose eggs have created two babies for two different families; Ruby, who travelled to India to find a surrogate, and now has two children via two different surrogates; Wren, a surrogate who carried two babies for one couple; Lorraine, an adoptive mother of two who was adopted herself as a baby; and Margaret, a birth mother in her seventies who gave her baby up for adoption fifty years ago. (All names have been changed.) After interviewing and transcribing the material, the form evolved organically to combine edited verbatim sections, descriptions of photographs, narrated scenes from meetings, reimagined memories, poetry and personal essay sparked by interviews and selected quotes from published books. In this way, I became the seventh voice within the project.

Sally Cline speaks of biography as serving as a window

on the times, that her writing on Zelda Fitzgerald's life 'became not merely a window into a destructive marriage but also a window into an unjust time in history for women who wished to achieve' (2010, p. 25). Similarly, I wanted my biographical portraits on 'other mothers' to illuminate the diverse and changing landscape of motherhood, leading to a deeper understanding, not just of one particular life, but of the wider social and cultural factors. The juxtaposition of diverse stories and voices, alongside my own responses to the material, allows a richer interpretation and understanding of the labyrinth of 'other motherhood', than that afforded by a single voiced memoir.

Ethical considerations were involved at all stages of my research. The first step before I could embark on recruiting and interviewing women for the project was to obtain approval from the OU Human Research Ethics Committee. A number of stipulations were made by the committee, including that: participants could only be recruited via 'gatekeeping agencies' (those used were Adoption UK, Surrogacy UK, Donor Conception Network and Natural Parents Network), all stories must be anonymised and a suitably qualified counsellor must be involved to offer optional debriefing to participants in case the interviews triggered emotional distress.

Social sciences researcher, Ann Oakley, has written extensively on her experience of in-depth interviews of women in the late 60s to 70s for research on 'housework' and 'transitioning to motherhood'. In her paper, 'Interviewing women: a contradiction in terms?' (Oakley, 2005, pp. 217-32), Oakley says that sociology methodology mainly operates a 'masculine paradigm' of interviewing behaviour, establishing a rapport as a means to an end to get interviewees to answer set questions, which offers a reductionist view of interviewers and positions interviewees in a passive role, exploring this as at odds with women's models and not being a good fit for feminist interviewers interviewing women. Oakley talks about the significance of: the interviewee's and interviewer's feelings, interviewees asking the interviewer personal questions (e.g. do you have children?), hospitality (being offered tea etc.), transitioning to friendship, and views the 'textbook code' (e.g. do not get involved) as adopting an exploitative attitude to interviewees as purely instruments of data rather than human beings. Oakley argues that in practice it is difficult to establish rapport (a traditional goal) without answering interviewees' questions (which in sociology research, should be batted away by commenting that it is the interviewer's job to gather opinions rather than offer them), claiming there is 'no intimacy without reciprocity' (p226).

Certainly, the women I interviewed wanted to know about my own experiences of motherhood, particularly interested in asking me questions about my experience of adoption (e.g. egg donor Charlotte asked how old my son was when I adopted him, birth mother Margaret asked if he has any contact with his own birth mother). To varying degrees, the women opened up to me as more than a researcher. In 'Telling Secrets, Revealing Lives – Relational Ethics in Research With Intimate Others', Ellis

(2007) deals with ethics from an ethnographer's point of view, discussing dilemmas arising in research where she either had a relationship with the biographical subject or developed a relationship (or became 'friendly') with the subjects over the period of research. She highlights the limitations of pseudonyms, detailing how anonymised subjects recognised themselves in the text of one of her books, exploring the fall-out:

I failed to consider sufficiently how my blunt disclosures in print might affect the lives of the people about whom I wrote. Instead I cared about how committee members reacted to my dissertation and whether my manuscript would be published as a book. Although I didn't appear often in the text as a character, I considered the story I wrote to be my realist, sociological story about them, not their story...

(Ellis, 2007, p.10)

As a mother interviewing other mothers, I felt a connection with my participants and a responsibility as a researcher, leading me to deliberate over potentially unflattering character portraits, ruminating on the inherent moral ambiguities. I asked myself how I would like my own complex experiences of motherhood presented.

Couser's *Vulnerable subjects: Ethics and life writing* (2004) discusses the issue of informed consent and who is capable of giving it, exploring the inherent problems of parental memoirs, straddling an authorised and unauthorised biography, whereby parents assume rather than request rights: 'What are intended by parents as beneficent acts may be perceived by their children, once grown, as violations of their autonomy, acts of appropriation or even betrayal' (Couser, 2004, p. 57). Mindful of the impact of autobiographical writing on my own children, I had to make an ethical decision over how much of my own story as a biological and adoptive mother to include in the creative writing for my project, and how this could potentially violate my children's privacy. The personal essays I wrote for inclusion in the project explore my experience of pregnancy loss and my experience of training and preparation to adopt, ending on seeing a video of the baby who went onto become my son. I took a decision not to include any other discussion of either of my children in the creative writing, nor reveal other aspects of their personal stories, which I see as belonging to them. Likewise, although I adopted as part of a couple, I decided to present only my own parenting journey; my children's father has his own story.

In 'The Unseemly Profession: Privacy, Inviolable Personality and the Ethics of Life Writing', Paul Eakin explores a key consideration for life writers: whether the writer has objectified the person whose life is being documented, transforming him or her into a 'thing' (p166). This links with Couser's critique of adoptive father Michael Dorris's memoir of raising an adopted son, *The Broken Cord*, which Couser says reduces his son to a 'case study' (Couser, 2004, pp. 56-73). Couser explores how after diagnosis of foetal alcohol syndrome, literary treatment of Dorris's son, Adam, changes from 'a fully individualized character' to becoming 'a type

and his story a case history' (Couser, 2004, p. 60–61). This made me question whether my initial decision to select six women to interview by category (adoptive mother/birth mother/egg donor/mother via egg donation/surrogate mother/mother via surrogacy) was reductionist, reducing the women to 'types' rather than individuals. In reality, the women who came forward did not fit easily into one category – the first, Alison, being a mother through adoption and egg donation, the second, Charlotte, being an egg donor, biological mother and stepmother etc. All aspects of these women's lives that were discussed were fascinating, not just the ring fenced aspects associated with their 'categories'.

Linking these discussions on appropriation and Oakley's assertion of the 'masculine paradigm' of social sciences interviewing, likewise a biographer has been traditionally reviewed as an 'expert/authority' narrating the life of their 'subject'. The biographer has traditionally remained absent in the text and/or presented as objective, their processes invisible to the reader. Literary editor, Boyd Tomkin (as cited in Cline and Angier, 2010, pp. 149-151), talks about 'a new wave of biographical literature' over the past two decades, which 'puts the storyteller centre-stage, and makes a drama out of his quest for the subject' (p.150). The idea of having the biographer centre stage may be viewed as an innovative way of working but the inclusion of a meta-narrative, writing about the process of life writing, doesn't eliminate the risk of appropriation. If the biographer is no longer an absent voice but acknowledged as a person with their own role in the journey of narrating another's life, how does this shift the paradigm?

This idea of the storyteller as a pivotal character can be seen in Alexander Masters's biography, *Stuart: A Life Backwards* (2006), which relays the author's meetings with a homeless man named Stuart over a period of two years. However, despite the apparent progressive approach of Masters including himself as a character in Stuart's story, as a middle class author writing the biography of a vulnerable homeless person, Masters can be said to be 'articulating the other'. This can be problematic in terms of the unbalanced power dynamic, with its inherent potential for appropriation or even exploitation. A number of ethical issues are involved including: Stuart's vulnerability and ability to give informed consent; relational ethics (as Masters interviewed Stuart over a period of two years, developing a relationship with him; and how Stuart is represented, the notion of exoticising 'the other'. Masters examined homelessness from the 'outside in'. My project differs in that I am exploring 'other motherhood' from the vantage point of a biological and adoptive mother, one could say 'from the inside'. Although I cannot claim to know what it feels like to be anyone other than myself, and have not experienced what my interviewees have, the overlaps and shared experiences with the mothers interviewed alter the dynamic between researcher and researched. Can I be defined as articulating the other, if I am the other? Clearly, there are still delicate issues to be negotiated. I am not a vulnerable birth mother who felt she was coerced into adoption; I am a PhD researcher seeking to gain an academic qualification from the interviews.

I am a White British interviewer interviewing women from cross-cultural backgrounds. There is a fine line between 'appreciation', seeking to deepen understanding of another's experience, and 'appropriation', using an aspect of another experience/culture/identity that is not your own for your own personal interest or gain.

There are no easy answers to ethical conundrums, no set rules that apply to every situation. Rather there are principles that can be applied, other writers' and researchers' experiences – good practice and mistakes – to draw on. This paper is an attempt to reflect on the ethical decisions made throughout researching and writing up the *Other Mothers* project, knowing it remains an area of open dialogue.

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The Ethics of Life Writing: Full Sight of Her

Patrick Wright



My debut poetry collection, *Full Sight of Her*, is published by Black Spring Press (2020). It's largely about a seven-year relationship I had with my partner, Kim, before she passed away in 2017. About 70 percent of the poems were written while Kim was alive. She inspired many of them and was an avid supporter of my work. The book also includes her photography. She was a practicing artist—and an artist with a visual impairment: a subject I'll touch upon later with reference to her images.

In part, my paper responded to current scholarship on grief writing. This is represented by a recent article published in *New Writing* on collaborative creative writing about grief by Rachel Robertson and Helena Kadmos. They write how 'Autobiographical writing about personal loss is fraught with dilemmas around ethics and the representation of other people's lives, and their deaths, and about the complexities of writing about bereavement experiences—how, in fact, grief can be written. These issues continue to be debated in life writing scholarship and amongst authors of memoir and auto/biography' (Robertson and Kadmos, 2020: 214). These authors, in the same discussion, also refer to the genre of the grief memoir. Joan Didion's *The Year of Magical Thinking* is one example they provide. Robertson and Kadmos correctly note that 'For some

readers, reviewers and critics, memoirs about personal grief are unsettling, unsavoury, or unethical' (216). They mention Frances Saunders for instance writing in *The Guardian*, who appears to echo these views. 'Some argue,' they observe, 'that grief, like pain, is unable to be communicated effectively and that private grief should remain private, rather than invite a voyeuristic form of readership' (216). This led me to ask: Does voyeurism imply some kind of separation or distancing between the reader and the subject matter? And is the object of the voyeurism the deceased, the author—or both?

I feel that my writing—rather than voyeurism—invites empathy and connection. Moreover, in a similar mode to how Christopher Reid writes about his wife, Lucinda, or C.S. Lewis writes about his wife, Joy, I present Kim as three-dimensional—the animating presence of the collection. I am, in Saunders' words, a modest observer of my sorrow rather than a declaimer of it (Saunders, 2011). My loss is secondary to the person I mourn, who remains a subject. As a consequence, I avoid one pitfall of the so-called grief memoir: using or even exploiting the dead to generate creative content.

The genre of poetry—given the language is often rather oblique or elliptical—offers more disguise as I see it than more conventional life writing narratives on grief or mourning. I avoid voyeurism, too, in the sense that mourning is interspersed with moments of love and joy. This suggests that Kim's passing can only be approached from within the context of our love and shared life together. The use of metaphor also provides a way to convey loss without self-indulgence or sentimentality.

I am left wondering, though, if critics such as Saunders are participating (consciously or not) in a shaming of those who grieve or need to go on grieving. This again occurred (though in a way that I didn't feel was deliberate) in my Q and A session, where one question—about when I thought my mourning might come to an end—had the familiar and ironic undertone of 'can't you just get over it?' I replied along the lines of how grief doesn't end so much as become compartmentalised into life and creative practice—at least for me, anyway.

Indeed, those who mourn can be often met with anger or frustration, rather than compassion; and I suspect this manoeuvre is similar to scapegoating—where, in a structural and cultural sense, the Other is shunned or cast aside, rather than empathised or identified with. The latter, for me, may be construed as an opportunity to

connect with the grief-stricken. Seen this way, neither the author nor the deceased is an Other: they are potentially us (you and me). However, I appreciate that this can be emotionally risky for the reader: to recognise that loved ones can be lost; that what we hold most dear is never as secure as we'd like to think.

So, I believe that voyeurism might be more of an issue if the author or deceased is regarded as an Other. And this dynamic can often belong to the reader—it's not necessarily within the author's influence.

It's worthwhile pointing out that it's only the final third section of the book (arranged, incidentally, into a dramatic three-act structure) where the theme of grief becomes explicit—and then it enacts what Bernadette Brennan has understood as a 'a creative, positive form of mourning ... mourning as an ongoing creative work' (Brennan, 2012, n.p.). It's not, that is, a self-indulgent record of my feelings. She quotes Susan Sontag's argument that memory is an ethical act and suggests that 'grief memoirs can be ethical works' (2012, n.p.).

Nevertheless, my book isn't technically a grief memoir. Yes, it draws on autobiographical content—and yet it's poetry. And our story is told in fragments rather than in descriptive accounts with a linear narrative.

I'm also aware there's a long tradition of male writers finding inspiration in women (as their muse, or otherwise). This can be problematic if the woman in question is not given agency. Though Kim is presented as the creative force in the book. Likewise, at no point do I present myself as powerful: on the contrary, I'm rather powerless in the face of illness. Another reference point in this context is Douglas Dunn's *Elegies* (written about his first wife, Lesley).

So, I see Kim as part of a symbiotic partnership and as a catalyst who inspired me to complete the remaining 30 percent of the book. As I was writing the early poems, particularly, she would often make observations and urge me to write them down. Creative decisions were easier when we could dialogue, and trickier afterwards, when I had to do my best to re-create her voice in my head. But this still felt like a collaboration: in our case a creative partnership doesn't end because of death. I think describing the book as a tribute or homage is fine too—as conferring respect is important. In actual fact, the book is there (more than any other reason) to honour our love and life together.

Often, as I've suggested, my writing—especially towards the end of the process—took on Kim's concerns, followed her thematic interests, and adopted her voice. This I now regard as part of my internalisation process, which can often occur through mourning. More recent poems have taken this further, where I've made use of prosopopoeia and written in Kim's voice (from the dead), or written as her in the form of a dramatic monologue. I'm aware that possible 'ventriloquising' is an issue here; and I admit to some cognitive dissonance in, on the one hand, feeling guilt about going too far in this direction and, on the other, giving voice to her experience. This has left me

thinking about appropriation and whether or not I am guilty in some sense or other; though I'm also aware that such feelings of guilt ('survivor guilt', quite possibly) are likely to be a symptom of major loss.

Appropriation can be defined loosely as the adoption of elements of one identity by another. But appropriation usually occurs without respect for or an understanding of context. So, my familiarity with Kim, her blessing and consent are key—which, fortunately, she was able to provide.

There's also, in a slightly more detached sense, my celebration of an unsung female artist. I'm also addressing prejudice around blindness (for instance, those visually impaired often see a great deal, but may see differently, and can still be visual artists and photographers).

There's nobility I think in drawing attention to these issues; and I'm appreciating dual authorship, even if this is only manifest in subtle ways. I give Kim as much credit as I can on the inner pages. At the same time, I've had her wishes in mind, and dual authorship wouldn't have been something she wanted. She'd want me to be seen as owning the words, even though I utilised her words and phrases from my notebook.

I also displayed in my presentation Kim's photography—her 'light documents' as she called them. These represented for her, in her own words, 'a beautifully abstracted and tonally biased world'. A selection of her high contrast photographs (significantly, these were the only pictures she was able to see in terms of form) are placed at moments of intermission in the collection—before each 'act' so to speak. There's also an image of Kim at the end: the reader is finally introduced to her visually. Kim didn't show a great deal of interest in having her photography exhibited during her lifetime, though she raised no objections to having a platform, and she had a modest online presence. As I see it, making use of her artwork is both an act of mourning and a resistance to it.

Perhaps all this has sounded like an apologia of sorts—perhaps one that wasn't strictly necessary. With such books, criticisms (or self-criticisms) can always be levelled and may be unavoidable; and there's always the possibility of a cynical reading. Yet I'm writing from my perspective and working through my feelings in the tradition of the lyric. Of course, the book is about myself as an author; but it's an author in a relationship (extending beyond death) and an author in a process—of grief, self-critique, reflection, amongst other things. The poems are also a kind of alchemy—in ensuring beauty survives through tragedy.

I ended my session by asking some further questions—of myself and my audience:

How should the domain of privacy in creative writing be demarcated? Or, to paraphrase Roland Barthes in *Camera Lucida* (with reference to his 'Winter Garden Photograph'), what remains 'just for me'? What do I decide not to share and to keep for myself? Have I

already, including through this account, 'over-shared' to an extent—in way that breaks an unspoken code of social or critical discourse?

And another question: at what point does the kind of 'after death' collaboration I've outlined slip into melancholia or interfere with other pursuits? How does our commitment to the dead, in other words, conflict with life?

I would be grateful for further dialogue on these ideas. Please contact me at the following:
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My poetry collection, *Full Sight of Her*, is available to purchase through Black Spring Press:
<https://blackspringpressgroup.com/products/full-sight-of-her>

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Patrick Wright has a poetry collection, *Full Sight Of Her*, published by Eyewear (2020). He has been shortlisted for the Bridport Prize, and his poems have appeared in several magazines, most recently *Agenda*, *The High Window*, and *Wasafiri*. He teaches English Literature and Creative Writing at the Open University.

The Liminal Zone: A Metaphor for the Interface between Teaching and Creative Practice

Mandy Haggith

Introduction

For creative artists in education, there is considerable interplay between teaching and creative activity, with each influencing the other. These effects can sometimes be negative, *e.g.* when teaching uses so much creative energy that creative practice is side-lined or even impossible, yet they can also be positive, *e.g.* when students are inspired by their teacher's creative work. The Liminal Zone research project is exploring the balance between such positive and negative effects and how positive interactions between teaching and creative practice can be nurtured, in order to make recommendations for spreading good examples. As a poet, novelist and teacher, I am deeply interested in the findings for my own personal well-being and career, as well as to help others.

Inquiry at the interface between Art, Research and Teaching, seeking to integrate and develop synergies between these roles, is known as A/R/Tography (Gouzouasis *et al.* 2008). The wider Arts-Based Research movement (of which A/R/Tography is a part) has demonstrated the power of creative and artistic practice as research inquiry (Leavy 2015), including creative writing (Harper 2008) and 'poemish' writing (Lahman, Richard & Teman 2019), and the benefits to students when teachers bring their creative practice into their

teaching role (Vanada 2017). It has also shown that '[c]rossing boundaries, boundary encounters and boundary partnerships are necessary for the integration of a landscape of practice' (Wenger-Trayner *et al.* 2015). As exemplars of boundary crossers, 'hybrid' academic-artist practitioners have been studied, exploring how they manage the 'uneasy' boundary crossing between academia and art through 'identity work' (Lam 2019). The concepts of hybridity, boundary crossing and identity work will help to elucidate the teaching/creative practice boundary.

Insights about institutional support for teaching and creative practice are being sought by exploring the liminal tidal zone metaphor. Use of metaphor is a key method in poetic inquiry as it provides a powerful way to articulate emotion and generate new insights (Gitlin & Peck 2008), (Barrett 2011), (Vincent 2018), (Fernández-Giménez, Jennings & Wilmer 2019). Beyond its use as a literary device, metaphor has been promulgated for other disciplines, including educational discourse (Cameron 2003). Wenger proposes collective exploration of metaphor as a method for facilitating social learning in the central of three stages: engagement, imagination and alignment (Wenger 1998). Leggo encourages researchers 'to linger in the spaces of binary oppositions in order to build bridges like metaphors from one vertex to

another' (Leggo 2008). The liminal metaphor in particular has been shown to be important in identity studies (Beech 2011). In a teaching context, Todd claims that 'exploring the existential dimensions of pedagogical relationships ... requires a language of in-betweenness, or liminality' (Todd 2014). A tidal zone metaphor exploration seems therefore particularly relevant for building meaningful knowledge exchange between hybrid artist/teachers.

Background and Rationale

With the increasing success of creative practice University degree courses there is a growing need for staff who can sustain both teaching and creative practice, but there has been little research into the experience of these 'hybrid' staff, the methods they use to maintain balance between the two areas of their role and the support University management can provide to them. The risks of creative burn out of staff are high, as this causes loss of experience and expertise from Universities, so this is a significant issue. A sustainable situation is needed where creative practice and teaching nurture each other and boundary crossing is facilitated.

The research takes the tidal zone as a central metaphor, using this archetypal liminal zone to represent a fruitful ebbing and flowing dialogue between our roles as artists and teachers.

Research aim and questions

The overall aim of this project is to explore how creative arts teachers can achieve a synergy between their teaching and creative practice and how employers can empower them to do so.

The primary research question is: How can universities support synergies between teaching and creative practice of arts staff?

Subsidiary questions are:

- What is the extent and nature of boundary crossing between creative and teaching practice by university arts staff?

- What insights can be generated from the intertidal zone as metaphor for the experience of the creative/teaching interface?

Methodology

This is a mixed methods action research project, involving four action research cycles: an initial quantitative inquiry (survey), followed by a participatory qualitative (appreciative and arts-based) inquiry, then triangulation or 'integration' of data (Johnson & Onwuegbuzie 2004:22) and then discussion of the results.

The first cycle of the research will be a quantitative inquiry cycle to establish the extent to which Scottish university creative arts staff experience interaction between their creative and teaching work. This will be by means of an online survey. Questions will seek to determine:

- the proportion of teaching staff who carry out creative practice at work and/or in their own time;
- how many experience a positive effect of teaching on their creative practice, and vice versa;
- experience of the temporal balance between teaching and creative practice;
- measures staff find helpful in achieving positive interaction between the aspects of their work;
- metaphors and methods for conceptualising links between creative and teaching practice.

The survey evidence will be analysed to provide a comparative overview of staff experience of the creative and teaching practice interface. It will also be used to identify up to 12 participants for the subsequent qualitative inquiry. Selection of participants will attempt to achieve a mix of artform and location.

The second action cycle will use appreciative inquiry interviews in coastal locations to explore the experience of creative arts teachers and the tidal zone metaphor. Results of these interviews will be fed back to all participants who will be invited to take ownership of the ongoing research process as full and equal partners, forming a creative community of A/R/Tography practice. Reflection will involve me doing a poetic



inquiry. The other participants will be invited to reflect creatively on this metaphor in their own artform. In the third cycle, results of the quantitative and qualitative phases will be triangulated collectively at a reflective retreat for the community of practice, using concepts developed in the qualitative phase to explain and understand the quantitative results or indicate dissonances that may indicate interesting complexities in the relationship between teaching and creative practice. This will also involve curation of an exhibition of the artworks, drawing out these concepts. The final action research cycle will involve dissemination of results to all survey responders, to senior management at UHI and other participants' universities, and to wider bodies such as Universities Scotland (and NAWEI!), sharing insights, seeking feedback and nurturing best practice.

Conclusion

Many University creative arts teachers feel themselves to be inhabiting a liminal zone, as partial outsiders to academia, and this hybridity can limit their ability to nurture the next generation of creative talent. It is necessary to challenge what Lam (2019:17) calls the 'higher status' afforded to science and social science research in Universities compared to creative practice, addressing it through both individual identity work and institutional support. There are many issues, from contractual to well-being focused, from literary to curatorial, from pedagogical to managerial, which are likely to be raised by this project with relevance to the academic community across Scotland and beyond.

If you would like to know more, please get in touch, or complete our survey here: <https://www.inverness.uhi.ac.uk/research/centre-for-remote-and-sustainable-communities/projects/the-liminal-zone-a-metaphor-for-the-interface-between-teaching-and-creative-practice/>

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Making a Literary Podcast: a Flexible Form for Writing, Teaching and Research

Dr Sherezade García Rangel & Dr Amy Lilwall



Figure 1 Amy Lilwall and Sherezade Garcia Rangel at the Falmouth History Archive, *The Poly* (2019)

Arriving at the podcast form – Sherezade

In the summer of 2019, as an early academic with a plan and an idea, I set out to learn how to make a literary podcast. I had no training, adopting instead Vincent Van Gogh's perspective on a letter to Anton van Rappard, "I keep on making what I can't do yet in order to learn to be able to do it" (1885). As a listener, I was fascinated by the podcast form, and finding myself in an institution with the right equipment and technical support, I decided to begin to test using the podcast as a literary form. After all, writers were already engaging in making or taking part in podcasting (Mahnke, 2014; Eddo-Lodge, 2018; Longform, 2020; The New Yorker, 2007) and I wanted to know how I could use it to make and disseminate practice-led research, use it as a collaborative tool for creative projects, and explore how far could the podcast go as a place to tell stories.

[Nest Podcast](#) (2018) for FalWriting was the first approximation where I commissioned a team of students and staff to write a story one letter at a time under the premise that *someone finds a nest*. The podcast features each letter read by its writer and a conversation with the host and producer, a student at the time and now a voice actor for my award-winning podcast [On The Hill](#), where the writer discussed the writing process and the tension of not being able to communicate with the previous or following writer anywhere else but in the letter itself – a key creative constraint of the project. *Nest's* first letter was written by Amy Lilwall, a principal writer for *On The Hill*. This project enabled us to test the podcast form

for fiction and discussions of practice, and to understand podcasting as a creative collaboration suited to writing in education. This was the seed that eventually led to developing my own independent podcasting practice in 2019 with *On The Hill*.

Amy and I have continued to collaborate and we joint forces to run a literary podcast workshop for NAWE2021. In this article we summarise the workshop's key ideas, we discuss our podcasting experience and practice, the benefits it brings to our writing, teaching and research and share some tips to help you get started.

Defining the literary podcast



Figure 2 Sherezade recording at The Soundhouse, Falmouth University (2020).

Like a short story, a poem, a novel or a script, I understand the podcast as a form of literature which enables writers to tell stories, evoke places and feelings, describe people and help us share and learn about the human experience. The podcast takes us back to oral storytelling and creates an immediate and intimate connection with voice, and it is within this that lays its immense potential. The podcast, which is relatively easy and inexpensive to produce, can be delivered freely and widely through digital platforms, augmenting the writer's audience. Published to a set rhythm – whether all at once or serialised – it can not only reconnect us to the beginnings of storytelling but to some of its more industrialised practices, such as serialised publication in parts.

For writers in education the advantages of podcasting practice continue, for not only is podcasting a great

tool for their own writing practice, but it can also aid the teaching of creative writing and provide a place to conduct and articulate research. Practicing and teaching podcasting has enabled me to develop a multimodal writing practice (Barnard, 2017) and gain skills through a range of new roles including producer, podcast host, sound artist and editor.

As a lecturer I have noticed the benefits of having an independent podcasting practice. I have gained confidence in public speaking, learnt to manage my time better (for workshops, seminars and lectures), and the practice of making an overarching narrative for *On The Hill* has helped me craft better narratives for my modules. Being the host of a podcast has taught me how to build a relationship with the listener and this has reinforced my teaching practice.

As I writer, making a podcast has enabled me to learn how to write better for audio, how to be more daring, experimental and playful with my practice and how to engage with archival material to bring its texture into contemporary storytelling. My writing skills are embracing sound and as my independent podcasting practice grows – and with it more opportunities to make audio, such as my collaboration for SoundArt’s [Lighting Birds: A Game of Sonic Tag](#) (2020) – I look forward to enhancing my practice across these different mediums.

An Awareness of Sound: A Podcasting Writing Exercise

1. Write an evocative sentence inspired by a place you love.
2. Read it aloud experimenting with different ways to deliver it.
3. Reflect on the sound and delivery: is there anything you could remove or add, or edit/rewrite to achieve a better sound?
4. Go back to the sentence and edit/rewrite as you like, paying close attention to how the sentence behaves in audio form. This is one of the key skills for a writer/podcaster.

Craft and Podcast – Amy



Figure 3 Amy Lilwall recording at The Soundhouse, Falmouth University (2020)

The above exercise encourages writers to think about how sentences can be constructed on order to be evocative and clear when read aloud. Before contributing to *On The Hill*, I often wondered about the enunciative talents of audiobook readers and news presenters, but had never thought about crafting the written word specifically to be listened to. It has now become part of my process to read aloud when I’m writing and in doing so, I am encouraged to think about the differences between *reading* and *hearing* a story. Among other things, I have to pause in the right places, emphasise certain words and generally make sure that a listener can follow the thread of the story. I am not yet very good at it, and this has also made me realise the skill involved in striking the right balance. When thinking about the elements of narrative, I have had to pay close attention to the following in spoken stories:

- **Narration** – My narrator very much becomes a character. They cannot fade back into the walls as narrators of prose are often allowed to do. The exercise above may have shown you that voice gives us access to the *emotion* of the story and so it makes sense to endow an identified narrator with this emotion. This is why first person works so well and is probably preferable – even if this means using a peripheral narrator. In one of my stories written for *On The Hill* (about Ellen Cuffe, Countess of Desart) I use second person as this perspective also keeps the listener close and involved.
- **Dialogue** – When speaking a story, I have to be very clear on dialogue attribution as, unlike readers of audiobooks, I am not particularly good at voices! When reading dialogue on the page, the visual cues allow us to navigate the conversation seamlessly. This isn’t the case, of course, when listening to a story being read. Here again, learning how to pause (to signal change of speaker) as well as a heavy-handed use of dialogue attribution is very helpful here.

In the Classroom

Writing for *On The Hill* has reminded of a long-known idea about a human being’s natural capacity for narrative. A quote by H. Porter Abbott captures this nicely: ‘For anyone who has taken a child to the movies and watched her pay attention, it is hard to believe that appetite for narrative is something we learn, rather than something that is built into our genes.’ (Abbott: 2002) In her book *Monkey’s with Typewriters*, writer Scarlett Thomas reinforces this idea: ‘We already work confidently with patterns and shapes in narratives, although we might not always realise this.’ (Thomas: 2012) She mentions specifically the power of the ‘anecdote’ and how our favourite funny anecdotes—often well rehearsed—highlight a tendency to order and dose information in such a way that it follows the rhythm of story. Most people are capable of doing this well and, very often, spontaneously.

In the classroom, one exercise I ask my students to do is record a story without thinking about it. In doing this, I

encourage them to consider the idea that people think in narrative. We discuss the way that human beings can tell a story without dwelling on the delaying tactics required to create suspense, or the arrangement of events and blind spots in the story that will make for that impactful twist at the end. We apply these techniques automatically. So, how does this help students when they are writing for sound projects? Well through recording an anecdote and listening back to it, they discover that the special ingredient that comes to life when they are recorded—voice—is a very powerful vehicle for story. The texture of the human voice, among other things, enhances the intimacy of the podcast. Famous podcasts such as Lea Thau's *Strangers* and spoken word story telling events such as The Moth play on this. An example I referred to during the conference is simply called *Alfie* and was recorded by a second-year Single Honours Creative Writing student in October 2020. The example has a basic aim—to tell the story of the student's little dog, Alfie—but is unedited. The listener will notice that this story has a clear beginning, middle and end. They might also notice the literariness in the images used, such as when the student compares a snowy day to a black and white movie. They won't fail to note the emotion in her voice: her laughter, her pauses, how she lengthens and allows breath into the word 'amazed' to describe how she feels when she brings puppy-Alfie home; her slight sadness at telling us that 'he's an old-man dog now'. This curation of moments that summarise Alfie's life support the simplicity and impact of the ending—'You don't have to be of the same blood as people to become family'. The recording is a minute long but contains all the ingredients of story.

The efficacy of this simple story also proves that students don't necessarily need recording studios; human beings carry recording equipment on them. In 2017, I supervised a group of third year students who had decided to write and record a series of short stories as part of their final year project. One member of the group spent hours under a duvet-covered table in order to recreate recording studio conditions. They also seemed to have a great time creating their own sound effects through walking up and down stairs, opening creaky doors, pulling corks out of bottles and stamping in the bathtub (for giants' footsteps as I'm sure you will have guessed). In her article entitled 'Why Zines Matter: Materiality and the Creation of Embodied Community', Alison Peipmeier refers to 'scrappy messiness' as part of the charm of Zines. I believe that the intimacy of podcasts—often spoken right into your ears—as well as their quirkiness allows for the same kind of scrappy messiness, and this is where the 'human' ingredient is found.

In her article for the *New Yorker* 'How podcasts became a seductive and sometimes slippery mode of storytelling' (Mead: 2018) Rebecca Mead comments that podcasts are 'fashioned for every conceivable interest or taste'. Podcasters have the freedom to air exactly what they want as their fate isn't governed by the threat of the rejection pile. With this in mind, our final piece of advice would be to think of your own idea for a podcast—as niche as you can make it! *On The Hill*, Sherezade's podcast about stories from Falmouth cemetery, has

proven its worth as a storytelling platform, a means of enriching teaching and research, a hub for collaboration and, most appealingly, a creative output over which its producer retains complete control. If you are quite taken with the idea, why not have a go yourself?

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Amy Lilwall teaches Creative Writing at the University of Lincoln. Her first novel, *The Biggerers*, was published by Point Blank in 2018. Amy has written for *Short Fiction in Theory & Practice*, *New Writing*, *Writing in Practice* and *The Literary Platform*. Amy is also a contributor to the award-winning *On The Hill* podcast.

Read On: New ways to engage young people with reading and writing

Helen Preston

The email below is written by a young woman who participated in the activity called “My life in Strips”, an activity in the *Read On* project. This young woman, now aged 21, is called Linn Isabel Eielsen, and she was 18 and a student at a local college in my home town when she participated and won the first My life in Strips competition in 2018.

The competition had 155 contributions in 2018, from students and pupils in England, Ireland, Italy, Portugal and Norway. Linn was a bit of a talent before *Read On*, and has since 2018 established herself as an artist. She is a cartoonist, a writer, an illustrator and a musician, she has her own comic strip in both newspapers and in social media, and she is also an illustrator for a Norwegian publisher. Anyone interested in her work, can visit her web site: www.linneielsen.com

Read On is not just a project for people like Linn, but also for all students and pupils aged 12-19 who would like to take part in creative work within the world of reading and writing in various ways. The aim of the project is to develop 12-19 year olds into active readers and to motivate their interest and ability in creative writing.

The aim is also to involve and inspire teachers and librarians to communicate literature in as many ways as possible to increase young peoples involvement in the world of literature.

For more information, see <https://readon.eu>

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Helen Preston is a school leader from Norway. Her school is lead partner in the Read On project (gro.helen.preston@skole.rogfk.no)

Three years ago, some friends in my high school dragged me to a poster in the hallway. I stared at it, and shook my head. There was no point in even applying, because there was **no** way I was going to place, nevertheless win. They told me to join in anyways. I silently took their advice, and applied some of my comic strips to the first “My Life in Strips” competition.

A couple of months later, I received the notion that I had won.

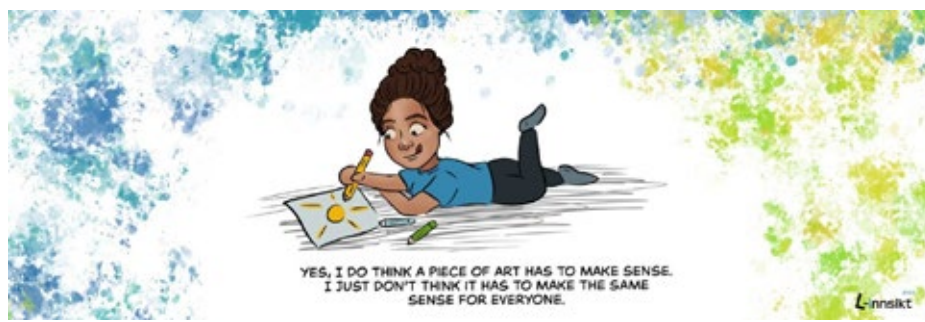
This was the start of realizing that my comic and art maybe could be something. Maybe it already **was** something? Getting the prize was amazing, but the true value was lying in the fact that someone believed in me. Someone saw something in me and my drawings, and wanted me to keep telling my stories.

Last year, I was the youngest person to have illustrated a book for Cappelen Damm, the biggest publishing house in Norway. Today I'm finishing off my third book, and later this year my comic L-innsikt will turn 5 years old. I'm drawing, writing and creating every single day, and doing things I never even dreamed of doing. I'm forever grateful for the opportunities and experiences Read on has given me, and for the seed of self-confidence that was planted in me by the programme.

Competitions and programmes like “My Life in Strips” and “Read On” are incredibly valuable for young people. They engage, inspire, motivate, and give us something back for our hard work. Being young today can be difficult, and the need to express ourselves in healthy ways, is tremendous.

Thank you for inspiring and motivating us to create content in forms of art, text, music and photography. And thank you for teaching me to believe in myself, by believing in me first!

Sincerely, Linn Isabel Eielsen
aka. @Linnsikt



Embrace the Machines!

Online Writing Instruction Towards Preserving Humanity

David Moody & Bern Mulvey

In 2020, the challenges of online instruction became familiar to many educators as their institutions shifted to online education during the Covid-19 pandemic. In this talk, two instructors shared their efforts, experiences, and eventual expertise in leading online-only classrooms. The title of the talk, “Embrace the Machines,” is a call to action that is not new in the field of online education; however, these instructors challenge the definition of machine, machinery, and mechanization in their talks with the goal of discovering a panacea for the malaise of online learning felt by students and teachers alike. Their talks take an autoethnographic approach to first-hand experiences with designing and delivering online courses in creative writing to traditionally in-person students.

The shared context of the speakers’ backgrounds is important to the discussion.

Both speakers represent a major R1 university located in the US southwest. At this university, creative writing and literature courses are open for enrollment to majors and non-majors alike. The average length for an in-person course at this institution is 15 weeks, but online courses typically are a 7.5-week session. In either case, undergraduate creative writing courses have an average enrollment cap of 25-30 students. Each instructor traditionally has taught online and in-person courses in rhetoric and composition, literature, and creative writing, meaning that they encounter students just starting their university lives as well as those preparing to graduate.

In the spring 2020 semester, the university shifted a majority of 15-week in-person courses online, a move that extended into the Fall 2020 and Spring 2021 semesters. These courses offered limited in-person options to students and share the same issues typical of online education, including issues related to technology, a lack of direct interaction/socialization, perceptions of online courses being easy alternative to--or a subpar version of--a “real” class, self-motivation, and distractions found in environments not crafted for education purposes (i.e. coffee shops; home) (Friedman, 2020). In addition to these pre-existing challenges, problems specific to the pandemic online shift include

- students and instructors being forced to adopt unfamiliar technology,
- student and instructor resistance to online environments,
- disengagement sourced in the video chat experience,

- students and instructors expecting “the same class but online,”
- student and instructor uncertainty about the future in general, and
- a loss of intrinsic motivation due to overwhelming extrinsic systemic deterrents.

Many, if not all, of the above challenges are rooted in that these students did not opt into online learning. It was compelled. This obligatory shift and begrudging participation in a seemingly mandatory environment is unlike what many students expect from a college experience.

Mulvey focuses on the challenges specific to teaching and learning writing in an online environment. Beginning writers typically lack awareness of audience needs, as well as familiarity with the wide variety of techniques available to writers to meet those needs. For this reason, many interactions (peer editing, group and class discussion, etc.) in a traditional writing course serve important functions beyond assessing individual understanding of the course materials. Students are also being socialized into a more sophisticated awareness of the community of readers/writers around them, a community of individuals with thoughts, backgrounds, ambitions, etc. different from their own--i.e., they are learning about “audience.” How to recreate this crucial learning experience in a fully online class?

Mulvey proposes a community-centric approach to online courses. In this case, the mechanism of the classroom is student interaction, and once set in motion, students follow suit, focusing on how they can support each other throughout the online experience. Having a sense of community leads to a perception of an audience, a feature of online courses that can be underdeveloped by way of Zoom’s (and other group video tool’s) camera-off mode. With audience awareness in place, student interaction, participation, and course investment improves.

But what are the best practices for building an online community? Mulvey proposes five key features be included in online writing courses:

- Exposure to a wide variety of readings
- Small and large group discussion (readings, techniques, ideas and issues)
- Workshops of student writing
- One-on-one conference opportunities with instructor
- Struggling students identified early

Furthermore, Mulvey emphasizes the importance of four teaching tools available in most well-known Learning Management Systems:

- Zoom Video Conferencing
- Discussion Boards
- Announcements
- Analytics

Finally, Mulvey highlights the pedagogical possibilities with each of these tools, including:

- Breakout room/poll/share screen functions in Zoom
- Methods of achieving effective online peer review via discussion boards
- Community creation via the course announcement function
- Using analytics proactively to find/fix issues early, rather than penalize later

Following Mulvey's contextualizing talk, Moody shifted the discussion to a specific example of applying the above features to online creative writing courses using a game design approach.

His talk "Letting Them Choose Their Own Adventure," Moody took a problem-solution approach to issues of non-participation, disengagement, and agency loss in online writing courses. Student agency is generally low due to institutional restrictions. The recent forced shift to online-only education exacerbated that lack of agency. Additionally, the loss of a "real life" social element removes a motivator for participation. With less drive to participate, students decline to use whatever agency they have.

Moody discussed how he has faced similar challenges to agency and participation as a docent at the Phoenix Art Museum. Rather than restricting visitors to stay on a predetermined planned path, he adapts to their interests, being willing to shift the discussion to which ever painting catches their attention. He notes that all museum options are valid since the curator has already vetted them when creating each gallery. The result of this adaptative approach his improved participation in conversation.

Moody proposed bringing this choice-centric and curatorial approach to classroom design. Choice-focused course design has been linked to increases in student effort, task performance, and subsequent learning (Marzano, 2010). Additionally, when given choice by teachers, students perceive classroom activities as more important, resulting in increased engagement. Choice creates a perception of individual autonomy which positively influences intrinsic motivation and perceptions of agency (Getty, 2018). This agency, grounded in making content and assignment choices, transitions the course from a push model (passive info delivery) to an interactive model, where the learner makes the same types of decisions she'd make in a real-world environment (Briggs, 2013).

Moody addressed how choice is an invitation to act that answers the implicit question "What now?" For this reason, choice-centered course design fundamentally

foregrounds problem-solving within a given scenario. However, in a course filled with students who perceive the online version as a simulation or stand-in for the "real" course, the real-world is what seems to be missing. Moody argued that to simulate the seriousness of the real world, it became necessary to incorporate live moments of making choices with real-world impact.

Gamification of a course can provide a serious-scenario experience. A gamified class is one "in which some, many, or all of the elements of curriculum and instruction correspond to and bear the hallmarks of various game mechanics" (Cassie, 2016). Games playfully simulate aspects of real life by engaging six principles:

1. Strict rules that all players must follow
2. Conditions for success that are clearly defined
3. Satisfaction of a drive to succeed
4. Variable path of action (i.e. ways to win as well as lose)
5. Variable outcomes within predictable sets if gameplay is repeated
6. Four "mother" mechanics: agon (skill); alea (luck); mimicry (identity); ilinx (entropy)

In gamified courses, these features inform course mechanics that can sustain student engagement in online courses.

This gamification framework, paired with a course's focus on creative writing, echoes the gamebooks popularized in the 1980s by the series *Choose Your Own Adventure* (CYOA) and *Fighting Fantasy*, gamebooks reemerged in popularity in the 2010s. These books emphasize reader participation. Each story is written from a second-person point of view, with the reader assuming the role of the protagonist and making choices that determine the main character's actions and the plot's outcome. Pulling from gamebooks feature and a gamification framework, Moody outlined his gamified creative writing classroom.

- The course should be student-centered in its use of the 2nd person singular "you" address found in all course documents ranging from the syllabus to language in online modules
- Coursework should foreground "discovery" of content as opposed to mastery of content already discovered by others
- Students should be encouraged to view themselves as the protagonist of their own education narrative.
- The design should emphasize student choice in each activity, similar to the "If you want to _____, then turn to page _____" format common to gamebooks
- The design should be modular with concise units that could be rearranged as needed.
- The course should be text-based, not tech-based, to promote accessibility and to emphasize written language over media consumption

At the core of this design is choice. Students who have opportunities to express voice and choice on important matters become leaders in their own education narratives. Building choice into design can appear as asking questions (choosing to interrupt the system); managing time usage; self-organizing tasks; selecting

STEP 1: Select and read one of the following essays. I suggest you briefly skim each essay before settling in. For a collection of tips on how to read critically yet quickly, see the [“Tips on Professional Reading Practices”](#) module. Also, because this genre of writing can be reflective of a writer’s life, I highly recommend you look up the author’s bio or Wikipedia entry. The context a bio provides may affect the way the essay reads.

- MADDY CROWELL: The Great Divide
- MATT GROSS: How the Chile Pepper Took Over the World
- BROOKE JARVIS: Paper Tiger
- NICK PAUMGARTEN: Water and the Wall
- NOAH SNEIDER: Cursed Field

STEP 2: Select and read one of the following chapters. I suggest you select a chapter that relates to the content, theme, or style of the essay you read for step 1.

- [Chapter 22. Picturesque Travel: The Aesthetics and Politics of Landscape](#)  (RCTW)
- [Chapter 31. Europe](#)  (RCTW)
- [Chapter 32. North America / USA](#)  (RCTW)
- [Chapter 33. Latin America](#)  (RCTW)
- [Chapter 39. The Polar Regions](#)  (RCTW)
- [Chapter 40. Deserts](#)  (RCTW)
- [Chapter 41. Mountains](#)  (RCTW)
- [Chapter 42. Sea](#)  (RCTW)

STEP 3: Write a **minimum** 300-word response to these readings in which you address the following prompts. Aim for **at least** 100 words to each prompt. Format your response as a brief essay and not as a bulleted or numbered list.

- **SELECT:** What have you read? Tell me, summarizing the main points and including any notable context (about the authors, purposes, etc) and any notable lines/quotes.
- **CONNECT:** How do these texts from Step 1 and Step 2 connect to each other? Provide examples as you explain the connections.
- **REFLECT:** How did these texts help you better understand the week’s topic? To what extent do these readings give you insight into writing? Into travel, people, or places? To what extent do these readings help you understand yourself or your world?

[Review these examples of successful and unsuccessful posts for guidance.](#) Post your response to this discussion board. Please title your post as follows: Name, Group #, Title of Reflection (Ex: KalissaHendrickson - Group 1 – “How I Became An Adult”).

STEP 4: Respond to two post. If you post before your group members, you can (a) check back later or (b) select and reply to someone else’s post. Each post response should be at least 100 words in length and indicate

Figure 1

which texts and resources to use (choice of learning material); opting whom to work with (collaborative choices); selecting which products to create; and identifying overall sequence of choices (BIE Rubric for PBL, Davis, 2016). The latter four design features are the primary factors in a CYOA course.

- “Selecting which texts and resources to use” can take the form of a curated bank of readings from which students select two to read, compare, and respond.
- “Selecting which products to create” can take the form of a curated bank of prompts for creative activities from which student select one to complete (i.e. style mimicry or form usage)
- “Opting whom to work with (collaborative choices)” can take the form of a required minimum number of responses per workshop discussion but not assigning group members or tasking who-replies-to-whom.
- “Identifying overall sequence of choices” can take the form of tasking students with reflective writing assignments at the end of each unit (and the overall course), with the goal of individual’s mapping their choices and choice outcomes to craft a personal learning narrative.

An example of these four features incorporated into a single assignment can be found in Figure 1 (above). This image shows an assignment from an upper-division online course in travel writing. In this assignment, students are asked to select one text from two banks of curated readings, write a critical response to those readings, and reply to two posts from other classmates. Unpictured in the reflective activity that takes place at the end of the course.

A similar example can be found in Figure 2 (next page) in which students are tasked with writing a brief essay

in response to a writing prompt. The key feature is that students may select and complete any of the three prompts.

In both the reading response and the writing prompt response, students are invited to evaluate the possible paths for completing the assignment, finding a path that best suits their interests. By curating the readings so that they all represent a key feature (i.e. untrustworthy narrators) and by curating the writing prompts to empathize a common objective (i.e. writing in fulfillment of poetic meter), students collectively practice the same skill but do so in a way that provides them a sense of agency, thereby improving their engagement, investment, and attention retention.

Through an awareness of student backgrounds, an effective usage of available online tools, and a gamified design, online creative courses can be a thriving learning environment for students. It is important to “embrace the machine” of online teaching technology, but it is equally important to remember that writing is a technology that transforms the ways in which one thinks (Ong, 1982). Central to that technology is its user--the student--who becomes part of the mechanization of the tool’s usage. The instructor, then, works most actively in the pre-teaching phase of course design to develop a system in which the student can act independently but within defined parameters. By anticipating troubles in a lesson and designing paths away from options that would result in that trouble, and by using feedback to show students what they still need to do to reach an objective, creative writing instructors can fulfill Jackson’s (2009) call to “never work harder than your students” while also being creative, embracing play as a seriously engaging feature of online learning.

For this week's READING RESPONSE, you engaged the relationship between one's race, ethnicity, and identity. For this week's WRITING PROMPT, you will write reflectively on this intersection as it relates to your own experiences.

STEP 1: Select one of the following writing prompts from *The Field Guide to Writing Flash Nonfiction*. Each prompt is taken directly from a chapter in the textbook, so once you have settled on a prompt, read the examples from the chapter. Keep in mind that your prompt response should take into account this week's identity question, "How are these aspects of identity related?"

Prompt A, from "Memory Triggers and Tropes" by Rigoberto González (FGWFN, 33). Recall a memory related to race or ethnicity that has emotional (not sentimental) value for you. To differentiate, an emotional response is attached to reason or thought and makes you ask (and want to answer) who, what, where, why, and how; a sentimental response is attached to feeling and simply asks those same questions without seeking to assess or investigate them. Now think about what image or object or symbol has become the memory trigger of that significant moment of conflict, crisis, or trauma. As you reconstruct the narrative, allow that image/object/symbol to become the center of the narrative. Let the memory trigger become another character in the story and let it carry the weight of the narrator's emotional journey.

Prompt B, from "Crafting Voice" by Jennifer Sinor (FGWFN, pg. 57). Write a letter to someone you haven't seen in a very long time. The occasion for the letter should be one that engages race or ethnicity. For instance, someone might write to their sister's son about his Confederate flag tattoo. Someone else might write to an ex, thank her for the lessons about Pakistani cooking.

It's a letter you don't plan on sending and can be to someone living or dead. Once you have composed the letter, go back to it and cut out all the throat clearing, the salutation, the small talk. See where the heart of the letter is, the issues, the dramatic tension. Read those moments aloud. Feel the strength of your voice. When we write to a particular person our voices are closest to the surface because we know who we are (at least in relation to the person we are writing). We know the stakes. This kind of knowledge over the material translates to a confident and vibrant voice. It can be useful to think about whom you might be writing an essay to, or even a book-length project. If we have a particular person in mind as we write, our voice is often stronger.

Prompt C, from "Writing The Brief Contrary Essay" by Patrick Madden (FGWFN, pg. 157). Following in the tradition of essayistic subversion, model a reflection after Charles Lamb's "Popular Fallacies." First published in *London Magazine* in 1826, these are a series of brief contentions against proverbs of his day. Some of the errors he argues against have retained their currency as prepackaged sayings, though some have not (perhaps he was successful in eradicating them?). In any case, his calmly reasoned counter-arguments tend to resonate with our own "common sense."

In your response to this prompt, write reflectively about a truism, stereotype, or commonly held belief that relates to some aspect of race or ethnicity. Note that the truism you respond to does not have to relate directly to you. For instance, I might select the truism that white people love camping. From there, I will discuss to what extent I think it is true, is untrue, and what personal experiences or ideas seem to counter/contradict/confirm it. You may also want to think of subversion not as simple contradiction, but as addition or modification—a "yes, however" moment. Finally, instead of limiting your writing to the general and generic, write narratively, incorporating an exemplary event from your life.

STEP 2: Submit a minimum 400 word response to the prompt. Please title your post as follows: Name, Group #, Prompt Selected, Title of Text (Ex: Sanchez, Rick - Group 1 - Prompt B - "My Multidimensions Family and Me").

STEP 3: Respond to each group member's post. Each response should be at least 100 words in length and indicate

Figure 2

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The Value of Writing Constraints in the Generative Workshop

John Vigna

It began like many writing experiments started out, by posing a challenge.

In 1960, two men made a bet. Bennett Cerf, the founder of Random House, challenged Theo Geisel, better known as Dr. Seuss, that he couldn't write an entertaining children's book using just 50 different words. Cerf bet Dr. Seuss \$50 that he couldn't do it.

The result was Dr. Seuss's book, *Green Eggs and Ham*. The book has sold more than 200 million copies in the last 60 years, making it the most popular of Seuss's works and one of the best-selling children's books in history.

Was it the bet itself or the creative power of limitations that led to Dr. Seuss's creative solution, one enjoyed by millions of readers over the years?

THE RIGIDITY OF RULES

Rigid rules and forms may seem counter-intuitive to novelists and short story writers, but by creating restrictions and slowing down the writing pace, you can actually generate creative thinking.

History and literary history, specifically, is filled with examples of people who embraced their limitations rather than fought them. George R.R. Martin wrote his best-selling novels on an old DOS machine running WordStar 4.0, ancient word processing software. This ensured a distraction-free environment where he could produce his best work. (He's also not on Facebook or Twitter.)

The Canadian writer, Mona Awad, read "13 Ways of Looking at a Blackbird" by Wallace Stevens, a work noted for his imagistic exercises in perspective. Stevens's structuring principle offered Awad a constraint to focus on discrete glimpses of a woman's struggle with body image and explore how that struggle played out in specific scenarios: dressing rooms, a tense lunch with a female friend, a visit with a parent, sex, a cardio machine war at the gym. Her book, *13 Ways of Looking at a Fat Girl*, selectively focuses on moments, tensions, dynamics, relationships she wanted to explore, creating the sort of multi-faceted portrait she was interested in. 13 ways, 13 stories.

If our limitations can provide us with the greatest opportunity for creativity and inventiveness, how can we work with our students to let their limitations fill them with strength and give them an enormous learning opportunity?

THE GENERATIVE WRITING WORKSHOP

In a generative writing workshop, students create new material, experiment with form and technique and develop their aesthetic. However, when low stakes writing experiments with specific constraints are incorporated, it moves students to the edge of their competency where new material, insights and breakthroughs can take place. Constraints help students scaffold their writing projects by trying new strategies, taking stylistic risks and working without the pressure or judgement that polished work often provides. Writing with constraints also helps writers deepen their process, lays the foundation for rich discussion and reflection, and helps them become more skilled writers.

WHAT ARE CONSTRAINTS?

"Constrained writing" is a literary technique where you create rules and limits for your writing. Constraints are common in poetry, which often requires the writer to use a particular verse form.

For example, haiku is a popular form of constrained writing. It's a form of poetry that originated in Japan, and it's structured with three lines of five, seven, and five syllables respectively.

In prose forms, an obvious example of constrained writing is Mark Dunn's *Ella Minnow Pea: A Novel in Letters*.

The plot is conveyed through mail or notes sent between various characters. The book is "progressively lipogrammatic" — as the story proceeds, more and more letters of the alphabet are excluded from the characters' writing. As letters disappear, the novel becomes more and more phonetically or creatively spelled, and requires more effort to interpret. And so, the writing becomes *more* constrained as the story progresses.

When you're hemmed in, when you're constrained, there's great freedom with those boundaries. **You can write things out of you.**

HOW CONSTRAINTS HELP YOUR WRITING

The constraints in our writing often force us to make choices and cultivate skills that would otherwise go undeveloped. They drive creativity and foster skill development.

They give us a starting and end point instead of a blank page. They kick start a project and force us to do the work.

They break down complex topics of craft and technique and allow us to work on them by applying our learning to those specifically, instead of within the scope of a larger work.

And in doing all of these things: they can hoodwink you into completing bold work, longer work. I supervise six novel thesis's every year from very talented writers and if there's one thing they have in common it's a fear of writing a book. It seems too big! Where do I begin? How do I maintain energy to do it? Am I smart enough? Etc. Writing constraints can put parameters around their work, breaking it down into smaller, more manageable parts.

In many ways, reaching the next level of creative performance is simply a matter of choosing and completing the right constraints.

HOW TO CHOOSE THE RIGHT CONSTRAINTS

When using constraints to improve your skills, a less is more approach is advised.

1. Decide what specific skill you want the students to develop. The more specific the skill, the easier it will be to design a good constraint. For example, in writing fiction, students rely heavily on backstory or flashbacks as a way to write a story, often to make up for a lack of story in the fictive present. That's too general and it's something they are comfortable with. By writing with the constraint of no backstory or flashback, it helps them develop creative different ways to move the narrative forward, to reveal character, to include conflict, to raise the stakes, etc – aspects which are invaluable in strong fiction.

2. Design a constraint that requires this specific skill to be used. Be clear, specific and detailed. Offer steps to complete it, like good help instructions. Rather than the openness that general "writing prompts" generally create.

3. Get your reps in. Constraints can accelerate skill development, but they aren't a magic pill. You still need to put in your time. These are not one offs. Build them so one precedes the other. Avoid having them feel like busy-work and scaffold them towards longer works. The best plan is useless without repeated action. What matters most is getting your reps in. The iterative nature of writing.

EXAMPLES OF WRITING CONSTRAINTS

To set up constraints within a generative workshop, start with considering the language in describing the activities. For example, try using the term "writing experiments" instead of writing exercises or writing prompts. A writing experiment suggests just that. It's an opportunity to experiment within a set of constraints that are applied in the writing. An experiment offers students an opportunity to take risks, to move to the edges of

their competency and to play. An experiment suggests that the reward is the experiment, therefore it feels like a low stake's activity. Tie each experiment to a particular aspect of the tutor's teaching: craft, technique, emotions, politics, readings, etc. This ensures that students welcome the experiments and see their value in being able to generate material.

A writing exercise can imply something less serious, or disposable or something to be taken less seriously, and perhaps offer less of an opportunity to take risks in the work. And a writing prompt is a term that's perhaps diluted now given the millions of sites that offer writers "prompts" to start writing. In general, prompts can be less structured and constrained.

When reviewing students' work on their writing experiments, treat these as low stakes activities that are marked complete or incomplete. Offer light and encouraging feedback (when working with undergraduate students) and ask questions or raise possibilities the experiment has generated with graduate students. Offering comments on the experiments creates an ongoing conversation between student and tutor on how the progress is going, what's emerging, what's being left behind – rare conversations that are part of the creative process rather than after the fact.

Scaffold the experiments to build upon each other from week-to-week and to help students work further with in developing each experiment more deeply. Design each experiment to help generate material for a major submission (full short story) so the experiments feel connected, to help writers explore different aspects of their material in taking stylistic risks. When students work on experiments that lead to stories in progress, this helps them develop a process entrenched in the spirit of generating material, getting comfortable with what emerges, curious, seeing patterns develop, discovery and openness, being more vulnerable to their material instead of being critical of it.

ADDITIONAL TIPS

When designing writing experiments for your students, consider the following tips:

- Encourage students to share their reflections on the experiment, not the experiments themselves. The students should do the work on their own and share it with the tutor, not the class. They work independently with the tutor with notes, discussions and revision and share instead their reflections on the challenges of the work, not the work itself. This takes them away from the challenges of writing for their peers in a workshop where student texts form the basis for discussion.
- Coach students to create their own constraints. Developing constraints can motivate students and engage them in a focused experiential learning moment, therefore helping them develop into skilled writers
- Invite students to write about how they used their constraints. For example, they might write a self-

reflection or review on how they completed their work, what challenged them, why and how they worked around those challenges solidifies the learning. Reflective writing helps student writers learn to interrogate their own writing, which in turn helps them learn how to write.

- Avoid creating experiments that feel like disposable exercises. Although these are generative exercises, the experiments should be relevant to what the students are doing. They should never appear as “make busy” work. Students will lose faith in the process and in you.
- Be transparent. Explain the prompt and tell them why they’re doing it.
- Impose constraints on longer works. For example, challenge them to write a story without any backstory, use of flashbacks and to remove all instances of “She felt/heard/saw/looked/tasted,” etc.

RESULTS

Since working with students in a generative workshop characterized by writing experiments, I have seen some of the most exciting work produced by students in writing fiction. They work in different forms (list stories, language-driven stories, form stories, etc), try different points of view and voices, experiment with verb tenses and narrative devices. Not only are they producing more exciting and accomplished work, but it’s clear that the

process is both daunting and exciting to them. They approach their writing with an openness and curiosity rather than feeling pressure to produce work that would otherwise be read and discussed by their peers in a traditional workshop.

The students demonstrate a command of their intent and process and are better able to work with revision as a result of having gone through different ways of exposing their work to themselves. They are profoundly changed as writers, more open and receptive to following hunches and ultimately more in touch to access their writerly instincts. So, yes, while they are learning important tools of craft and technique, they are ultimately learning how to trust themselves. After all, isn’t this our goal for student writers?

ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

John Vigna’s first book of fiction, *Bull Head*, was selected by Quill & Quire as an editor’s pick of the year and was a finalist for the Danuta Gleed Literary Award. *Bull Head* was translated and published in France (2017) by Éditions Albin Michel (Loin de la violence des hommes). Named one of 10 writers to watch by CBC Books, John is an Assistant Professor of Teaching and Pedagogy Chair at the University of British Columbia School of Creative Writing where his focus is on pedagogical and curricular strategies for 5000 creative writing students across the MFA, BFA and BA Minor programs including online/ blended teaching innovations. His novel, *No Man’s Land*, is forthcoming in Fall 2021.



Interested in making a Creative Contribution to Writing in Education?

Please ensure the submission has some connection to the theme of the issue, or relevance to Writing in Education in general. We’re especially interested in creative pieces (poetry, flash fiction, short form prose) that might have been produced as an outcome of an idea that is being shared in the magazine. For example, you might discuss using poetry as inspiration on a Creative Writing workshop and share some of the group’s outputs and then include a piece you have produced yourself in response to the workshop.

We will also accept standalone contributions if accompanied by a brief context paragraph.

Research-informed approaches to Teaching Online

Francis Gilbert

I was delighted to share some of my ideas about research-informed online teaching at the NAWE conference. My talk was well attended with seventy people watching it live. It is now on the NAWE website as a video talk.

Since the 2000s, I have been using videos and online platforms like blogs in my teaching. As a school teacher in a large secondary school until 2015, I created websites to bring together all the vital information about the topics I was covering. Wordpress blogs are particularly good at marshalling together multiple sources of information, and providing you as a teacher a chance to offer your views and strategies. You can see my blog about William Blake here: <https://williamblakereloaded.wordpress.com/>. It includes the YouTube videos I made where I perform and sing Blake's poems, and also analyse them. I cannot pretend to be a great singer or songwriter at all, but I improvised music around Blake's poetry as a way of showing my pupils (and others) that creative writing can be played with, interpreted and performed.

At the beginning of my NAWE workshop, I used puppets to tell a story which illustrated my key points about teaching online. I cannot pretend to be expert puppeteer or storyteller, but I offered my show in the spirit of playfulness. In Figure 1 you can see my 'inner princess' – the person in me who desires to be perfect – meeting the magic wizard who the princess wants to solve all her problems with teaching online.



Figure 1 My inner princess meets the online wizard who will solve all my problems.

Sadly, the wizard disappears and my inner princess falls down the 'learning pit': the place where learners get stuck. There, she meets a devil, who represents her doubts.



Figure 2 The princess meets her inner demons

The rest of my talk involved my inner princess learning about all the solutions that could help her climb out of the learning pit.

While this opening to my talk might seem rather naive, substantive research shows that when teachers turn their explanations into stories, then their students remember their central points much better. Glonek & King write:

Teachers should not apologize for using their storytelling skills in class nor should they feel that their students are always best served by covering large quantities of expository material in a PowerPoint presentation. (2014: 40)

Stories are great ways of assembling disparate bits of information and presenting them in a meaningful, motivating and memorable fashion. They are what Deleuze & Guattari would call 'assemblages' (2004) – bits of stuff brought together into a dynamic whole. They 'territorialise' information – give a grounding, offer a landscape – but they also afford their audience 'lines of flight' (Deleuze & Guattari 2004: xvi): a chance to find their own flow, to escape from someone else's story and find their own one. I suggest in my talk that a good way of territorializing your thoughts/feelings about online teaching and find your own 'line of flight' is by starting a learning journal about your experiences. Such a journal should be professional in focus but also deeply personal (Bolton 2006). It should be full of things like 'venting'.

Figure 3 illustrates what venting involves.



Figure 3 Venting drawing by the author

Figure 5 is my circumplex about online teaching.



Figure 5 My circumplex about online teaching

Another way of more precisely exploring your feelings is by drawing a circumplex which psychologists use to itemise how people's affect (their emotions) (Tseng 2014). Figure 4 is a circumplex I made to show the vital emotions involved in everyday life.

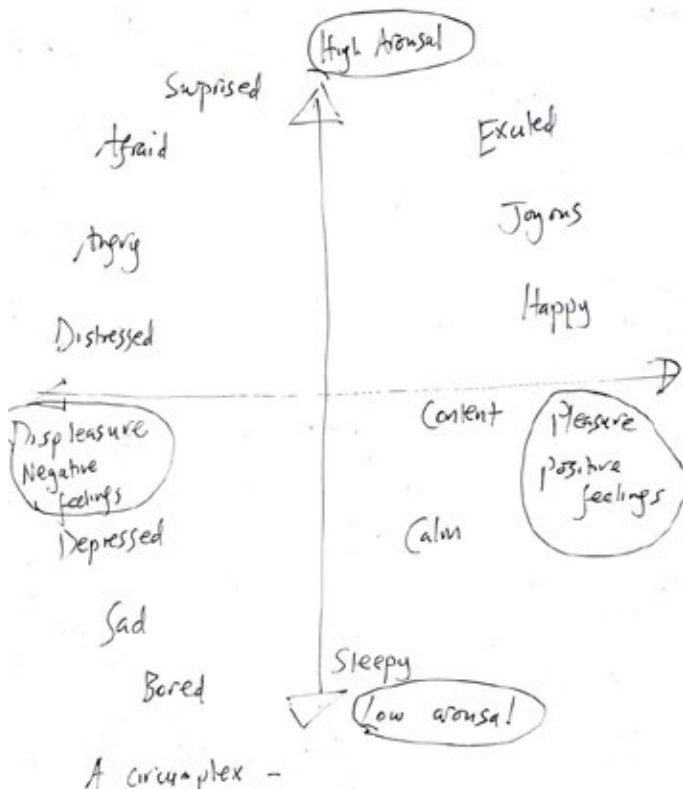


Figure 4 The author's drawing of a circumplex

You can see that 'high arousal' and pleasure in me is generated by positive student feedback, but high arousal 'displeasure' by negative feedback. Both generate a great deal of energy, but in different ways. So, the thing here is to consider how best to use this energy. I argue that as an online teacher you must take a 'Growth Mindset' approach (Dweck 2014) to online teaching as opposed to a 'Fixed Mindset'. The two approaches are outlined in the following table:

Fixed Online Teaching Mindset	Growth Online Teaching Mindset
I'll look stupid if I say I don't know how to do it	I'll learn from discussing things that confuse me
I must never make any mistakes	Learning from my mistakes will help me improve
I can blame people and situations if I don't succeed	By understanding how other people and situations affect me, I'll become more aware of what helps me and what does not
Either you have that ability to operate the technology and teach online or you don't	I can learn and grow as a teacher all the time, no matter how old I am: taking the right attitude towards the technology will help me

Better to give up rather than suffer from stress	There will be stressful times, but with a mindful approach, I will acknowledge and accept my feelings and this will help me relax in the long run
These online classes are complete nightmares	These online classes are challenging, but I'll discuss them with colleagues and experiment with some different strategies if things don't work out
Reflecting upon practice is a complete waste of time, it will just stress me out	Actually I can learn a great deal from reflecting and analysing my practice

This is probably the most important point I made. With teaching online, you are always going to fall into the 'learning pit' (Figure 6). There will be times when you want to give up because it is such a new and challenging area in so many ways. Trying things out, learning from your mistakes is the way to improve. This is how technically accomplished people become technically accomplished.



Figure 6 Falling Down the Learning Pit

During the rest of presentation, I offer some research-informed strategies for developing meaningful online learning, which included Hew's excellent research into what works with Massive Open Online Courses (2016) and Laurillard's seminal ABC method of designing online

learning (2012: ABC Learning Design 2020). Please watch the video presentation for more on this.

My central advice is to adopt a Growth Mindset to online teaching. This is easy to say, but difficult to carry out in practice because it is a tricky, contentious and stressful process, fraught with many issues. But it is being aware of your emotions and learning to respond in a way that will help you grow as a person and a teacher which ultimately helps the most. This is what the research really shows.

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Francis Gilbert is a senior lecturer in education at Goldsmiths, University of London and head of the MA in Creative Writing and Education. He has published many books, mainly focused upon educational themes, including 'I'm A Teacher, Get Me Out of Here' (Short Books 2004) and 'The Last Day of Term' (Short Books 2011). Most recently he published a novel, 'Snow on the Danube' (Blue Door Press 2019).