

# The Creative Interactions Project

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## SHARING TEACHING APPROACHES ACROSS ART HISTORY AND CREATIVE WRITING

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### Introduction

The Creative Interactions project was born of an informal discussion between two Open University (OU) colleagues – Clare Taylor, an Art Historian, and Heather Richardson, a Creative Writer – about the ways that engagement with visual art enhances the study experience of students in both these disciplines. Art History and Creative Writing share a common concern with how Arts & Humanities students interrogate the visual world. The purpose of this project was to discover how students learn from the ‘toolkit’ of each discipline, as well as to examine the benefits of inter-disciplinary learning. The objectives were to develop Creative Writing students’ awareness of the value of studying original artworks in order to develop their writing, and to introduce Art History students to using Creative Writing techniques as an additional method of analysing artworks.

### Background to the project

Founded in 1969 as the ‘University of the Air’ the OU has carved out a space as the leading provider of distance learning across the UK and further afield. Its main site is in the city of Milton Keynes, the last of the so-called new towns constructed in the UK. The campus was built on a former agricultural estate, whose principal house (Walton Hall) still survives and is used by the University as offices, as well as a library, Faculty buildings and other facilities added since the 1970s. In common with other Universities, since the OU was established the institution has built up a collection of artworks by British and international artists, many of which are on display at the Milton Keynes campus or in the nation offices in Belfast,

Cardiff and Edinburgh. This collection was the focus of our project.

As Charlotte Behr and Sonya Nevi have noted in relation to their project developing Humanities teaching using the campus at Roehampton, UK, ‘every University has its own history, environment, and resources that can be explored, all with an intrinsic interest to their students’ (Behr and Nevin 2019: 397). The OU’s art collection is in some ways typical of others in the UK, in other ways not. It contains portraits of Chancellors (Appendix, 1) and Vice-Chancellors; artworks donated by staff (and a few students) and works commissioned for specific sites. As well as focusing on modern British artists, such as Edward Bawden and Mary Fedden, on the advice of an Art Work Group in existence up until the early 2000s the OU collected paintings, prints and sculpture by First Australian, African and Nepalese artists at a time when the work of these groups was not well represented in the UK. The collection now presents an opportunity to explore issues around the role of the creative and visual arts in defining global, local and individual identities, questions that lie at the heart of contemporary concerns in teaching the Arts & Humanities.

However, as the Open University is a distance learning Higher Education institution (HEI), most students never get the opportunity to visit and view this art as they study remotely, from home. The Creative Interactions project was therefore an opportunity to fulfil one of the QAA criteria in Art & Design - that students interact face to face with works of art in order to develop skills in analysis and visual literacy (QAA, 2019, pp.7, 11). From a Creative Writing perspective, the project drew on the

long tradition of ekphrastic writing (writing inspired by art works – see the ‘Further reading’ section at the end of this article for additional scholarly articles). Creative Writing tutors often use visual materials in activities as prompts for poems and stories. The QAA notes that Creative Writing students are developing skills as both maker and critic (QAA, 2019, p.3). The project was also influenced by the ideas explored in *Third Mind: Creative Writing through Visual Art* (2002), which go beyond ekphrasis to consider the dialogues that result from bringing the two disciplines together. Bringing together students from Art History and Creative Writing to work with the Open University Art Collection therefore offered an opportunity for both creative and critical synergies.

The links between art collections and Creative Writing are not, of course, new. Writers use galleries as inspiration for their work, for example the Irish poet Paul Durcan’s collection *Crazy Women* (1991) was inspired by works in the National Gallery of Ireland, Dublin, and *Give You My Hand* (1994) by paintings in the National Gallery, London. Artists also use writing as inspiration in their work, either directly in terms of subject matter or in the emotions they seek to provoke in the viewer. Words can also form the actual subject-matter of artworks. The Scottish poet Ian Hamilton Finlay, for example, combined the visual and written in works such as *b\_oats* (Appendix, 2), which draws on traditional sayings. More recently, Cerith Wyn Evans has used the device of the palindrome in his light sculpture which invites the viewer or reader to walk through and around a circle of light (Appendix, 3).

### Project methodology

Our primary method in this project was to bring together a group of Undergraduate students from the two disciplines for a one-day pilot workshop at the OU campus in Milton Keynes where they would have a series of ‘encounters’ with a range of artworks. Clare Taylor had already explored the OU’s resources on a small scale with students studying the MA in Art History, involving face to face engagement with sculptures, paintings and prints on campus, which suggested the potential the collection might offer in teaching.

In order to give some context for our methodology it’s important to briefly explain the way teaching happens at the Open University, as this is different from many other HEIs. The teaching staff comprise central (i.e. Milton Keynes-based) and regional academics, and a sizable body of home-based Associate Lecturers. The central/ regional academics convene modules in their specialist subject area and write the teaching and assessment materials. The Associate Lecturers engage directly with the students through tutorials, marking and pastoral support, and base their teaching around these materials.

We decided to focus our project on Level 2 students studying our 60 credit modules A226: *Exploring Art and Visual Culture* and A215: *Creative Writing*. These modules are compulsory for students studying the degree pathways in Art History & Visual Cultures and in English Literature & Creative Writing respectively. Working in collaboration with two experienced Associate

Lecturers (ALs) who teach Art History (Diana Newall) and Creative Writing (Helen Mosby) we planned an approach to the day. It was important to find a way of measuring the impact of the event on the students, so we devised a pair of questionnaires, one to be completed at the beginning of the day, and the other at the end. In the first questionnaire we were interested in finding out several things: what students’ expectations were of the day, and what they hoped to gain from attending; which aspects of their studies they found most challenging; and what prior experience, knowledge or interest students had of the ‘other’ discipline. In the second questionnaire we revisited these questions to assess what had changed for the students, as a result of the workshop, and how they felt this might feed into their studies in future. Six students (three from each discipline) attended the workshop, which took place days before the first UK lockdown in response to the COVID pandemic in March 2020.

After the pre-workshop questionnaire was completed the workshop proper began, with the students divided into two groups according to specialism. Our main reason for keeping the students within their own disciplinary group at this stage was that from the student perspective the primary value of the workshop was to enhance learning on their module. Starting with the discipline with which students were most familiar also aided confidence-building in working with a new tutor and students. The first session involved the Art History students and Diana, the Art History AL, engaging with and analysing a series of art works, while the Creative Writing students focused on one painting, and were guided through discussion and writing activities by Helen, the Creative Writing AL. For the second session these activities were repeated, but this time with the Art History students moving across to Helen, and the Creative Writing students going to Diana.

### The Art History sessions

‘Great writers are great observers. They consider the world around them, notice overlooked details, and make connections. Looking carefully at art helps us to develop these observation skills. Art encourages us to slow down, look closely, and reflect on what we see.’

‘Looking to Write, Writing to Learn’,  
Philadelphia Museum of Art

The Art History sessions were designed to foster skills in close looking, using the technique of visual analysis– see the ‘Further reading’ section at the end of this article for additional scholarly materials on Art Historical methods. This method applies a series of formal questions to interrogate artworks, in order to arrive at a considered meaning rather than readings around the viewers’ initial responses and cultural influences which may determine the types of artworks and makers they respond to positively or negatively. It involves looking firstly at how artists have used formal devices in their artwork, including aspects such as scale, composition, pose, gesture and expression (where figures are present), the treatment of colour and light and viewpoint; secondly, at subject matter or the artwork’s content; and finally at function, or where and how an artwork was designed to be viewed. The Art History sessions focused on

artworks from across the globe. Students explored with Diana a group of works by First Australian artists, all paintings of either animals or vegetables on a material made from bark, the images depicted as if viewed from above (Appendix, 4). These were contrasted with a Zimbabwean sculpture, *Viper Sniper*, which made use of different textures and colours of stone, and a 1950s screen print by Edward Bawden of an English town, a scene whose muted colours and stark outlines recalled twilight on a winter's day. These examples allowed students to see how artists used formal devices to present their subject matter in different ways, leading to lively discussion. As Behr and Nevin have noted, teaching 'on location' enables new learning opportunities in front of artworks since it allows students to 'see, describe, interpret and discuss' (Behr and Nevin 2019: 400). For the Art History students, this technique was familiar, although the artworks, especially those from different cultural contexts, were not, but for many of the Creative Writing students this was a new tool with which to look at visual material.

### **The Creative Writing sessions**

For the Creative Writing sessions Helen focussed on a painting by the British artist David Tindle *Mural Panel C* (tempera on masonite board, 1978) (Appendix, 5). The mural is one of a set of three which were commissioned from the artist in 1978 to decorate a coffee lounge on the Milton Keynes campus. This large-scale painting shows a view of a lawn and trees seen through partially opened French windows. An old-fashioned rotary dial telephone has been taken outside and left off the hook. The fine net curtains hanging from the French windows lend a hazy quality to the view of the garden and open countryside beyond.

The students were encouraged to begin by looking initially at the whole picture, and then paying close attention to the details, such as the phone. What might it mean that it's been taken outside and left off the hook? There's a mystery there, the beginnings of a plot. The piece has important lessons for student creative writers, in the way that it shows without explaining. The narrative is implied rather than spelled out. The students then considered how the image conveyed information about setting, era and season: the phone suggests that the scene is in the 1960s or 70s; the setting seems to be a house or other building in the country; the greenery on the trees must mean that it's late spring or summer. Another important aspect of the painting was the point of view from which we were observing it, i.e. that of a person inside the room, looking out.

After this detailed discussion of the painting the students were asked to choose a viewpoint character – perhaps the person in the room looking out, or whoever had left the phone off the hook – and write a focussed freewrite for five minutes. The group then read their work out to each other, with Helen identifying the various Creative Writing techniques that they'd used, sometimes unknowingly. The freewriting technique is, of course, very familiar to Creative Writing students, but less so to the Art History students, and several of them found it a helpful way to break the spell of the blank page.

### **The plenary**

Once both groups had experienced the two approaches, they were brought together to study a triptych of artworks, *The News comes to Town, Milton Keynes, 1983*, by the Milton-Keynes based collective Boyd & Evans (Appendix, 6). These three drawings are all set in contemporary urban settings against a backdrop of similar three-storey pale brick housing. The first piece shows a burning car and fleeing figure, the second features a young woman carrying a small child, and the third has a man in the foreground and a crowd of people in the street behind him.

The session began with a formal analysis of the work, followed by a discussion of the ways this might be 'translated' into Creative Writing. Some students began to speculate about the chronology shown across the three parts of the work, while other noticed the almost total absence of the natural world. The image of the woman and child sparked associations with recent refugee crises, and the general atmosphere of unease and disorder led some students to think of science fiction or dystopian narratives. The students were asked to choose a viewpoint and write in poetry or prose. As with the earlier sessions, the students then read out their work, and were encouraged to give peer feedback.

### **Student learning and engagement**

In order to assess learning and engagement, the students completed two questionnaires in the course of the day. The first questionnaire was designed to assess the level of students' prior experience and interest in the two disciplines in advance of the workshop and establish why they had decided to attend. Two thirds of the students across both disciplines had a small amount of previous experience in using visual art as inspiration for writing.

However, the Creative Writing students appeared to have fewer specific expectations of what they would gain from the workshop than the Art History students. They hoped that Art History might give them inspiration for their studies, whereas the Art History students felt Creative Writing would help them in more quantifiable ways, such as improving their descriptive writing, or understanding the narrative or story in a painting. One participant who was a primary school teacher hoped she might gain some ideas for using Creative Writing with her pupils. Participants were also asked to identify the elements of their discipline they found most enjoyable and most challenging. Although the responses tended to be very discipline specific, there were some common themes, such as the challenge of fulfilling assessment criteria, and the difficulties of producing work that was both technically polished and expressive.

The second questionnaire was completed at the end of the day, and captured the students' reflections on the workshop, as well as their intentions to use the approaches of the other discipline in their studies going forward. This revealed learning had taken place across both disciplines, in particular through the use of a visual medium to inspire writing. One Creative Writing student said, 'Looking at artwork from an art historian's perspective would lead to different stimuli',

while another said they had learnt 'How to interpret art as a medium with a purpose'. The Art History students commented on the creative writing activities, with one saying, 'Spontaneous creative writing is hard!' while another acknowledged the benefits of writing without hesitation, stating emphatically, 'I can write!', suggesting a deepened awareness of the importance of honing what you write in academia.

Creative Writing students suggested that analysing the artworks in detail would help them with their descriptive writing, while the Art History students concluded that thinking of an artwork in terms of narrative would add a new dimension to their interpretation. Finally, the students were asked to rate the extent to which the workshop had helped them in their own discipline, and how likely they were to use the approaches of the 'other' discipline area in their 'home' subject in future. Both groups gave a high rating to the helpfulness of the workshops, with the Creative Writing students more likely to use Art History approaches in future than vice versa.

### **Pedagogical impacts**

In addition to student feedback, we asked the two AL facilitators to provide us with their own written reflections on the workshop, focusing particularly on aspects of pedagogy that they would incorporate in their teaching in future. The Creative Writing AL, Helen, noted that

I've always contrasted writing and painting by assuming that one moves through time and the other doesn't, so to learn [...] about the way a painting creates its own chronology by drawing the eye successively from one image to another was a revelation. This is analogous to the way that skilful handling of viewpoint in say, fiction, can direct the reader's attention or sympathy. Visual analogies work particularly well in creative writing and this will be particularly useful in A215 tutorials and feedback.

The Art History AL, Diana, reflected that

The [Creative Writing] approach involved much closer engagement with, for example, the possible story, mood, drama and presence in a work of art. Some of these connect to aspects of visual analysis and this could provide a different route into helping students carry out effective image analysis.

She noted the 'word-smithing' skills of the Creative Writing students, commenting,

The importance and skill of crafting effective words to communicate, whether for a fictional piece, publishing research or scholarship or delivering teaching was an area I had been aware of but the workshop really highlighted this. It suggested an area to work on for future writing projects.

Both AL facilitators felt their understanding of their own subject had been enhanced, with some practical applications that they planned to take forward in their teaching.

The project has also had wider impacts on learning and teaching. The authors have gone on to present their findings to audiences of colleagues, both within their School and to ALs from Faculties across the University, demonstrating how the approaches developed and defined in the project can be used in teaching across disciplines from Computing to Social Care using artworks drawn both from the OU's Art Collection and publicly accessible collections around the four nations of the UK. In addition, the project team gave a well-received panel presentation at the NAWA conference in March 2021.

The project has also had lasting impacts on the production of distance learning courses. The authors have shared their findings with Classical Studies colleagues investigating assessment methods for a new Level 3 module, while Clare has also collaborated with a Creative Writing colleague in writing inter-disciplinary teaching materials for a new Level 1 Arts & Humanities module, *Cultures*, including artworks by Hamilton Finlay and Wyn Evans (Appendix, 2 & 3). Heather will shortly begin work on a new Level 3 Creative Writing module, and plans to incorporate some of the approaches developed during the project into the teaching materials.

### **Summary**

Disciplinary division is inevitable even within a School of Arts & Humanities, due both to the modular way in which subjects are taught at many HEIs, and the administrative necessity of organising staff by discipline or subject area. This project has given participants insight into each other's discipline, leading to a greater appreciation and respect of the 'other' subject area, and deep reflection on the 'home' discipline. Amicable and productive professional relationships have been established. Particularly telling was the comment at the end of the workshop that looking at an artwork was the same as a piece of writing and the realisation that, as one student put it, 'everything goes into it'.

### **Future plans**

Looking further ahead we plan to roll out an online version of the workshop which will be available to all students on the second level modules A215 and A226. This will enable us to collect a more substantial amount of data. We plan to work with our two AL facilitators to refine the activities engaged in during the pilot workshop. To reflect that the OU operates across the four nations of the UK, we will include artworks from the Belfast, Edinburgh and Cardiff offices. This is another distinct advantage of conducting the follow-up workshop online.

In the longer term, subject to funding, we hope to develop open access teaching materials designed around the Creative Interactions concept.

## References

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- ### Further reading
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- Mansoor, A. (2014) 'Ekphrastic Practices in Catalysing Creative Writing in Undergraduate ESL Classrooms', *New writing (Clevedon, England)*, 11(2), pp. 208-227.

## Appendix – links to images referenced

1. June Mendoza (b.1924), *The Right Honourable Betty Boothroyd* (b. 1929), *Chancellor of the Open University 1994-2006*, oil on canvas, 1994  
<https://artuk.org/discover/artworks/the-right-honourable-betty-boothroyd-b-1929-chancellor-19942006-27212/search/locations:the-open-university/page/2>
2. Ian Hamilton Finlay (1925-2006), *b oats*, 1998, printed ink on card, 11 × 15 cm. Aberdeen Art Gallery & Museums, Acc. No. ABDAG017158. © Aberdeen City Council (Art Gallery & Museums Collections). By courtesy of the Estate of Ian Hamilton Finlay.  
<https://emuseum.aberdeencity.gov.uk/objects/118847/b-oats>
3. Cerith Wyn Evans (b.1958), *In Girum Imus Nocte et Consumimur Igni* (*We Go Round and Round in the Night and are Consumed by Fire*), 2006, neon lights, steel and glass, displayed: 30 × 30 cm, diameter 300 cm. Tate collection, T12314. Photo: © Tate. Seen displayed suspended from the ceiling in The Duveen Sculpture Galleries at Tate Britain  
<https://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/wyn-evans-in-girum-imus-nocte-et-consumimur-igni-t12314>
4. Djambala Marawili (b. 1953) *Burrut'tji*, natural pigment on bark, 2005  
[https://artuk.org/discover/artworks/burruttji-27558/search/locations:the-open-university/page/3/view\\_as/grid](https://artuk.org/discover/artworks/burruttji-27558/search/locations:the-open-university/page/3/view_as/grid)
5. David Tindle (b.1932) *Mural Panel C*, tempera on masonite board, 1978  
<https://artuk.org/discover/artworks/mural-27229>
6. Fionnuala Boyd (b.1944) and Les(ley) Evans (b.1945), *The News comes to Town, Milton Keynes, 1983: Panels 1,2 & 3*, crayon on paper, c.1985 (no image available on artsuk.org)



**Clare Taylor** is Senior Lecturer in Art History at the Open University. She has contributed teaching materials to modules including A344, Art & Its Global Histories, and is currently the Art History convenor for A112, Cultures, a major new inter-disciplinary module in Arts & Humanities. Prior to moving into Higher Education, Clare was a Curator at galleries and museums around the UK and she is an Academic Consultant to the OU/BBC series 'Secrets of the Museum'. She has a particular interest in teaching in the environment of the gallery and historic site, both online and in-person.



**Heather Richardson** is Senior Lecturer in Creative Writing at the Open University. Her current research interest is multimodal writing, with a particular focus on combining narrative textiles, digital storytelling, visual art and flash fiction/non-fiction. Her novels are *Magdeburg* (Lagan Press, 2010) and *Doubting Thomas* (Vagabond Voices, 2017). She is currently Deputy Director of the Centre for the Scholarship of Teaching and Innovation in the Faculty of Arts and Social Science at the OU.