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Inspiration, deadlines and working to a brief: student views of creativity, coursework and the world beyond

Abstract:

This paper draws on two main sources:

1. The author's recently completed research project funded in the UK by the English Subject Centre, which collected written contributions from more than 200 students (mainly undergraduate) in the UK and US, dealing with their expectations and experiences of Creative Writing in Higher Education; and
2. Bath Spa University Learning in the Arts Student Questionnaire (LASQ), an ongoing longitudinal survey collecting data and opinions from students studying a variety of creative art disciplines (including music, art, drama, dance and creative writing). Students are asked questions about their backgrounds and abilities, experiences and interests, aspirations and achievements. LASQ was especially designed to support the development of students' creativity, their ability to use new technologies, and their employability.

The paper explores:

- (a) Creative Writing students' sense (or lack of it) of themselves as practitioners, in relation to students in other disciplines, especially creative arts
- (b) their confidence (or lack of it) in self and subject
- (c) differences in background, experience and expectation between Creative Writing students and students studying other creative arts
- (d) the perceived relation (or lack of it) between Creative Writing workshop exercises and personal creative development
- (e) tensions between "own work" and work submitted for assessment
- (f) impact of deadlines, briefs and assessment guides on creativity
- (g) students' apprehensions and misapprehensions about writing outside the academy.

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Keywords:

Creative, Writing - Professionalism

This paper draws on two main sources:

1. My recently completed research project funded in the UK by the English Subject Centre, which collected written contributions from more than 200 students (mainly undergraduate) in the UK and US, dealing with their expectations and experiences of Creative Writing in Higher Education (**ESC**) (1); and
2. The Bath Spa University Learning in the Arts Student Questionnaire (**LASQ**) (2), an ongoing longitudinal survey collecting data and opinions from students studying a variety of creative art disciplines (including Music, Art, Drama, Dance and Creative Writing).

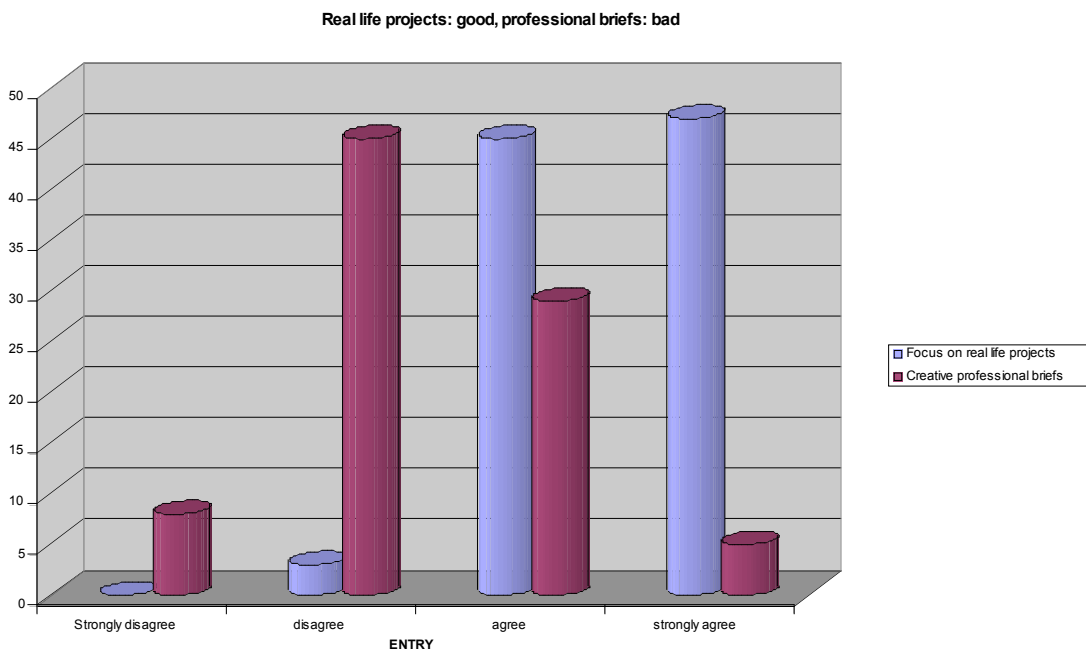
I will first examine certain key LASQ responses provided by students on entry; I will then further illustrate the student attitudes and perceptions there evidenced by reference to some ESC project responses; and finally look at the LASQ responses given on exit, in order to get some idea of the effect our course has had on student perceptions and attitudes.

Students on entry were asked two questions that might seem to be closely related, but which weren't perceived as such by many respondents (LASQ):

As your course develops you should focus most on developing: [option 9] experience of 'real life' projects.

People working in your Arts field are most likely to be creative when they: [option 15] have to meet the requirements of professional briefs (eg of clients, employers)

Fig 1



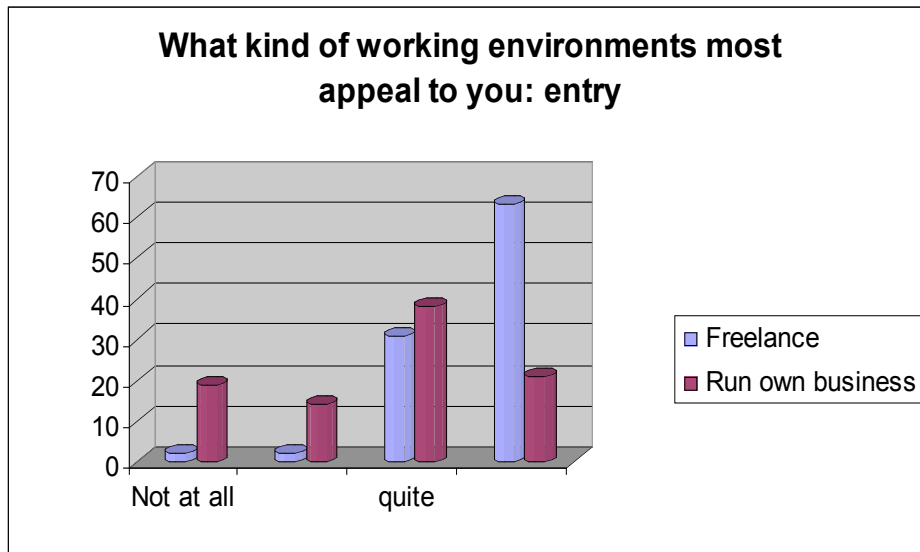
An overwhelming majority (92%) agree with the first proposition, that a priority of their work on the course should include the experience of real life projects (not even one student strongly disagrees); however, only a minority (34%) see working to a professional brief as being conducive to creativity. This discrepancy suggests that students don't relate 'real life' projects to 'professional briefs,' and raises the larger

question of their perception or definition of ‘real life’, and the place of writing – and especially their own writing – in it.

Their answers to another question may shed more light on this:

What kinds of working environment most appeal to you?

Fig 2



94% find *working freelance as a creative practitioner/artist/performer* very or quite appealing; however, *running your own business* is very or quite appealing to only 59%, and not very appealing, or not appealing at all to 33% of respondents. 63% find the freelance life very attractive: only 21% are similarly attracted to running their own business. So, across the range of responses there is evidence of a lack of perceived connection between freelance artistic activity and running a business. This contrasts with Graphic Design or Textile students, for example, whose responses to these questions (in the LASQ survey) correlate very closely.

Perhaps relevant is the fact that only 34% of Creative Writing students claim to have family or friends who have worked in the arts, significantly fewer than in disciplines such as Creative and Commercial Music (54%), Art (52%) and Dance (49%). Furthermore, only 17% of Creative Writing students on entry claim to have had a paid or unpaid job ‘relating to their chosen subject’ since leaving school, compared to 60% in Creative and Commercial Music, 56% in Dance, and 45% in Performing Arts(3).

On the one hand, this absence of professional experience is understandable, if one limits relevant employment to writing itself: but it is also possible that because students have a limited perception of how writing functions in the world, they may be excluding relevant work experience (for example, work in bookshops, libraries or cinemas; voluntary work involving creation of text in posters, fliers or newsletters; or writing activities within other employment environments, such as report writing, or descriptive writing in sales).

Two further response areas can extend our sense of how students relate creativity to ‘real life’:

People working in your Arts field are most likely to be creative when they:

[option 6] are well organised and have to work to a deadline

[option 7] are given a particular problem to solve

Fig 3 Entry responses:

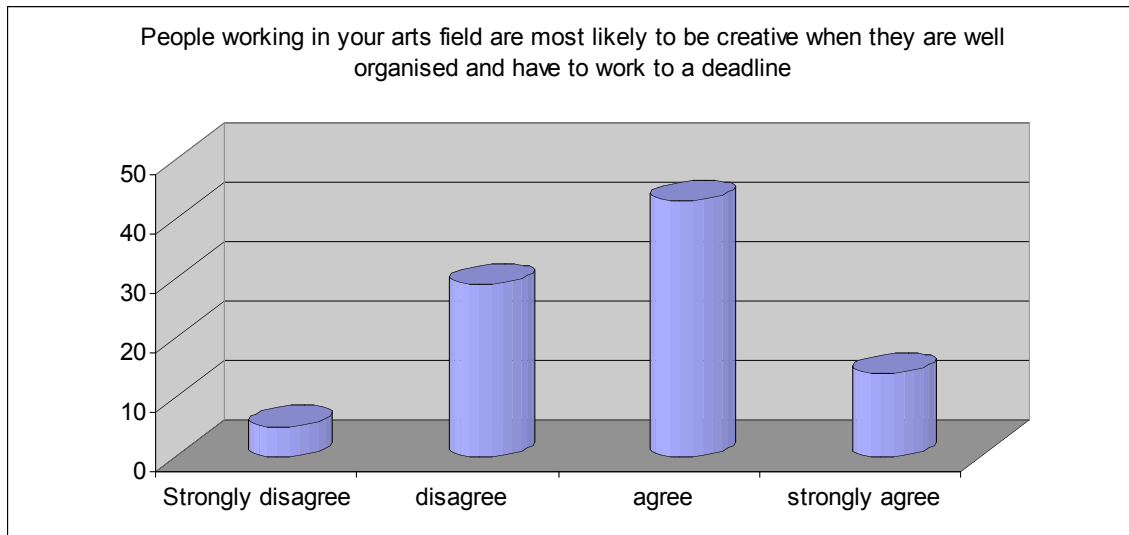
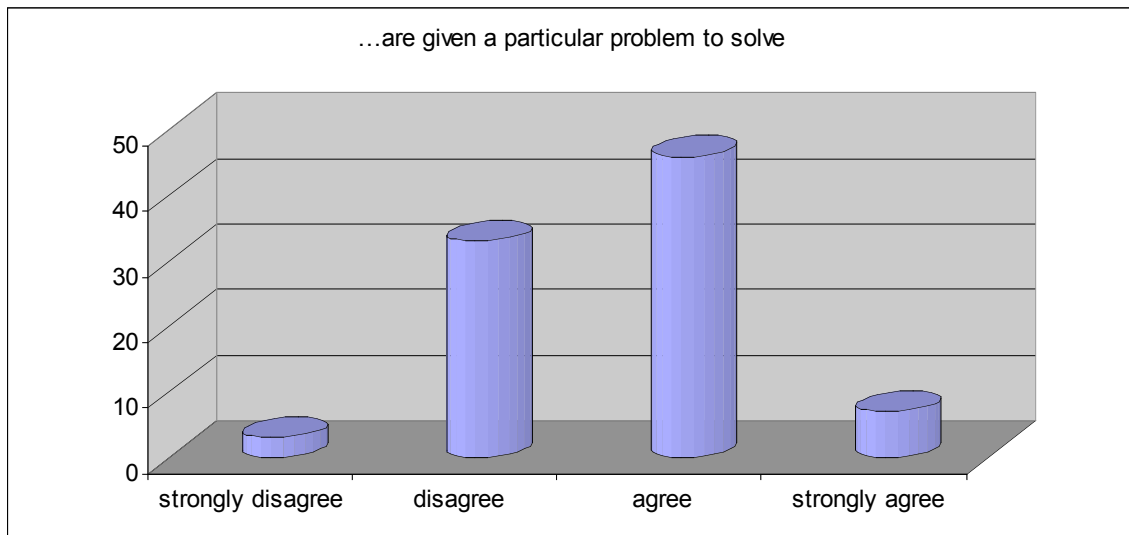


Fig 4



The sizeable minority who disagree or strongly disagree with these statements (34% and 36% respectively) suggests at least a tendency towards a romantic, non-pragmatic approach to the subject, which would also go some way to explaining the lack of

perceived connection between freelance and business, and real life projects and professional briefs.

This conjecture is born out by one strand of responses collected in the ESC project (4):

I enjoy my personal creative writing process, but resent the formalised structure. Ultimately this course is a means to an end, although I am keen for it to become more than just that, less laboured. Undoubtedly I will gain from it, however quite what that will be I'm unsure. Reading this back, perhaps I should be paying more attention. (Y1)

I sometimes find this course difficult as I don't like being restricted to what I can write and how long I have to write it. (Y2)

I understand that the course has to have deadlines and workshops, but I fear that it may stifle my creativity. I'm used to writing for myself and in my own time and so often find it difficult to allocate specific time frames for writing like I would for another module assignment. My ideas for writing have to come naturally – that's how they are my most creative – not forced. (Y2)

I'm not really sure how much I've learnt on the course so far. I did some work on poetry last year which I hadn't done before, but I haven't continued with it because I didn't think it was 'me'. I did a lot of writing for myself over the summer which I felt helped more. Being expected to produce X amount of words by a certain date is a bit offputting; either I'm uninspired or I'm too inspired and go over the word limit. (Y2)

This tension between course work and inspiration can, in some cases, result in the student separating their "own" creative work off from the work "done for the purpose" of the course:

Although I really do enjoy the course, I find I have very little time to write anything that isn't course-orientated. Now my time is taken up with reading texts and emulating their style rather than developing my own style. (Y2)

Before uni, I wrote a lot on my own. The workload quickly took that away from me, and now, over two years later, I've lost a lot of confidence in my prose work, and a lot of, shall I say, raw, unmanaged talent. (Y3)

However, all is not negative. Some students can manage the tension, and use it:

Previous to starting this course, I used to love writing freely and expressively in my own time. Whenever I was at a loose end, or felt inspired to write, I simply would! Now that I HAVE to write, I almost fight against it. I think it is my subconscious rebelling against the 'authority' over the tasks I have been given. What I do now is to convince myself, that I am writing for me and just me, and ten minutes into my writing I am on a roll and can't seem to stop, and so am writing freely and expressively again. (Y2)

Furthermore, many students simply appreciate the stimulus of deadlines and the benefits of regular writing:

Writing to deadlines has often forced my scripts to take an entirely new direction and has been of huge benefit to me – it finally made me stop procrastinating and get some actual writing done. (Y1)

I am glad I have taken the course because it has made me sit down and write even when I feel I don't have the time. (Y1)

I love the workshops. I feel like I'm working towards my folder all semester, rather than leaving it all to the end and dreading it, like history. (Y2)

Taking creative writing courses introduces me to different ideas about writing while also providing me with deadlines and otherwise spearheading my productivity. (Y2)

However, this appreciation of deadlines and external “inspiration” is frequently tempered with doubts about the efficacy of the course teaching methods:

Generally I enjoy the course but I feel that sometimes the exercises that we are asked to do are not beneficial to me as I feel I write better and have more ideas when I am alone and in a creative mood. However, I do find that lectures are a prompt, a way of giving me ideas of what to write about.

Time and again students draw this distinction: workshops are fun, but they can’t see the point of the exercises they’re asked to do:

I guess I’ve enjoyed the creative writing part of the module, ie. actually writing the pieces, but I’m not convinced I would have chosen to do it if I didn’t enjoy it. As for the seminars, I don’t know that, so far at least, I’ve particularly learnt anything new or had constructive criticism on my work. (Y1)

I enjoy creative writing, but I do not feel that I have really taken anything from the lectures. What I write is from own ideas and experience, I don’t feel that I have learnt many new techniques but I do feel that the lectures have guided me with trying out new things that I would not have thought to write about previously. (Y1)

I’ve found that in fiction classes like in most screenwriting classes that if I’m improving it has more to do with the fact that I’m being forced to write than what I’m actually learning in the class. (Y1)

Another Year 1 student muses at greater length:

I'm not sure how much I'm learning from the Creative Writing courses but it provides me with a consistent motivation to write that I haven't had before. I've always enjoyed writing and knew I was good at it, but I never had any ideas and could never seem to make time for it...If nothing else, the sheer volume of what I've written since I began this course has improved my writing. However, I sometimes wonder if there might be a less expensive way of gaining motivation. (Y1)

This last reference to "value for money" perhaps underlies many comments, where students don't feel that their course justifies itself explicitly enough (like a "proper" subject):

I feel that sometimes the workshops are a waste of time and that we would be better off having CW taught to us more like an English degree so there are less silly exercises and we get a better understanding of the texts we are studying and in turn improve our writing. (Y2)

Behind these and other comments there surely lurks the old spectre: can creative writing really be taught?

I believe that writers are born not taught - schools and programs can only develop talent, an ability that is already present...Writing programs free up time and space to write, not much else. (Y2)

On the whole, I find the course interesting and helpful, but not a deciding factor in my skills as a writer. (Y3)

Some statements can seem puzzlingly contradictory:

I believe that a writing course should be disciplined exercise. In the same way that athletes go and work out, or practise their game, writers should be doing the same thing. I'm not going to learn how to be a better writer by listening to a professor. I need to work it out for myself. (Y2)

The first half of the statement, drawing the athlete-in-training parallel, seems to imply also the trainer as resource and font of useful hints and methods: but the second half immediately and wholly contradicts this model. That professor clearly has nothing useful to contribute to the development of this student. The next student, while generous to the course up to a point, holds a very similar view:

I think ultimately – although one can be taught structure and writing subtext, etc. – that the talent lies within the writer. Although the course is useful and thoroughly enjoyable, probably one of the most important things is getting contacts within the business and learning the working process. As far as being taught to write well, I think talent is a major factor to start off with. (Y2)

This brings us to the area of professional development, of learning about the business of writing. Many students seem very early to know the difficulties involved in a writing career, to the extent of not openly claiming it as an ambition:

I certainly do not expect to be a published writer – but what I do know is how much I am enjoying the course and how much I would have regretted it if I had made the decision not to take this course just because many employers don't see it as a very worthy subject. (Y1)

I've learnt that writing as a solo career is pretty hazardous so I'm currently developing other projects to aid my writing, as it's always important to have a back-up plan. (Y1)

Others are not so clear:

Writing is always a pleasure and I see weekly sessions positively even though I cannot imagine how the workshop provides concrete training for writers... One fear of mine is that I might walk away at the end of the sessions still unsure how I can become a writer or that I am good enough to be one. How, for instance, do writers find publishers? What is involved in that? If I were to find a job as a writer, am I confident in saying that I am trained to write in a number of genres, style and purposes to be truly versatile? (Y1)

Not sure where it will lead to jobwise or if publishers want this degree, or if it is all based on merit or ability anyway. (Y1)

A sizeable minority exhibit a formidable level and detail of forward planning, in order to accommodate their desire to write with a ‘proper’ career:

Creative Writing would have been my ideal choice of university course, but in the case of fees now being £3,000 per year I knew I had to be ‘savvy’ in picking a course that would give me a good ‘spring-board’ into a job/career that would at least give an option of stability. So I chose to combine Creative Writing with 50% English Literature, meaning I would be eligible to train to teach English at secondary level via a PGCE after my degree, which I know I will enjoy and seemed a ‘sensible’ option all round. (Y1)

And so we confront another lurking spectre: the perceived “softness” of our subject, and its lack of credibility with employers, family and friends:

I didn’t come to university expecting to do Creative Writing. I just saw it as a ‘guilty pleasure’ to do as one of my Part One subjects as I’ve been writing poetry for a few years, and want to improve on it. I’d love to take the subject as part of a combined major with English Literature but am worried that the creative writing

element won't be taken seriously by employers and friends. One of my oldest friends, who I live with – an accounting student – calls it a 'hippie subject'. (Y1)

This dichotomy between enjoyment of the course, and anxiety about its reputation and usefulness, occurs again and again:

The course itself is fantastic! It is one of those subjects people respond to like "Oh really....yes, well what are you going to DO with that?" I suppose I've not really thought that far ahead yet; I reply that it's just something I've always enjoyed and that having a degree in something so enjoyable is just going to be a huge bonus. (Y1)

While some students take steps to mitigate the softness, others revel in it:

With regards to whether or not [the course] leads on to 'real work' – I certainly hope it doesn't, or I might have picked something else. (Y1)

Or another:

I took the course because I like reading and writing and I still do. Plus it's better than full-time work which just plain sucks. (Y1)

This apparently heedless hedonism may conceal and include some deadly serious ambition, both in terms of writing, and personal development:

Writing is what I enjoy so it's what I am doing now. I have no aim for the future, only the plan to succeed at whatever I do. (Y1)

Or, more pragmatically:

Creative Writing is why I am here. Unfortunately we must face the practical fact that 60% of published authors only earn £5K a year, and having a traditional degree may just save me from total poverty. If, by the end of my three years, I feel my work has improved and my experiences have broadened, then I will consider it a success. (Y1)

So, it remains to see how our course affects these students, and whether we can indeed regard it as successful. A substantial minority of y2 students are still absolutely certain of their desire and ambition to be writers. However, at least in my sample, only a few Y3 students maintain that single minded dream – and they can be apparently rather naïve:

I have always loved writing and this seemed the ideal course for me. All the other boring modules studying two-thousand-year-old poetry aside, I was surprised how much fun the creative writing modules have been, and the standard of my fellow writers has been high. I can't wait to be able to make a living writing imaginatively rather than some nine-to-five job. (Y3)

For others the tension we saw earlier between “self development” and “employability” has taken on a new urgency, prompting regrets or complicated dilemmas:

Having been in a workshop for two years now, I sometimes still feel absolutely helpless. I now know that I can write but I'm not much of a story-teller, if that makes much sense. I'm also spending a lot of money which is scary and absolutely terrifying, knowing that as much as I want to write for a living, chances are my future income will be menial... I really have enjoyed my experience and I've certainly learned a lot, but I can't help the feeling that I followed the wrong whim. Maybe I should've gone on and studied biochemistry as I had planned. (Y3)

My school teachers consistently told me that I had potential as a writer. I've always enjoyed it and it's come naturally. However, my degree course has

convinced me that it will not be a career. Instructors who are also writers have stressed how difficult it is rather than how to go about doing it professionally....

I hate to sound incredibly jaded but I feel it all boils down to money. It's why we're 'embarrassed' to admit we do Creative Writing. It's why I respond 'journalism!' when asked what subject I do. Let's face it, if writers made steady, high salaries, there'd be no stigma on our degree. As it is I'm afraid of becoming a starving artist.

That being said, I still love to write and it's the only thing I'm half-decent at – so what's a gal to do? (Y3)

More generally, in terms of the effectiveness of the course, I will cite just two extremes of the complex spectrum of response. First, the negative:

I am less confident with my writing now, as tutor feedback has proved detrimental to my progression. I find the writing modules slow and frustrating. I thought I would be a good writer one day, now I just think I will finish my degree bitter and slightly twisted. (Y3)

In short, the teaching was bad, the course design was bad, and all has conspired to throttle the thrusting young plant. On the positive side:

I am very confident. In some ways I always was, but now my confidence is tempered with patience and a greater understanding of the importance of community. Creative writing as a course encourages thoughtful interaction and knowledge exchange. So I feel more equipped to deal with people and life generally. Importantly, I am happy. Really bloody happy – I am a writer. (Y3)

This student not only has the confidence to proclaim herself “a writer”, but (a rare thing) has perceived and appreciated the social aspect of the course (“community”), and the transferable skills she has acquired which will help her deal with “life generally,” or (as we have termed it in this paper) “the world beyond.”

Let us finally visit the LASQ “exit polls”, where students leaving were asked similar questions to those asked on entry. Has there been a shift towards realism and pragmatism?

Fig 5

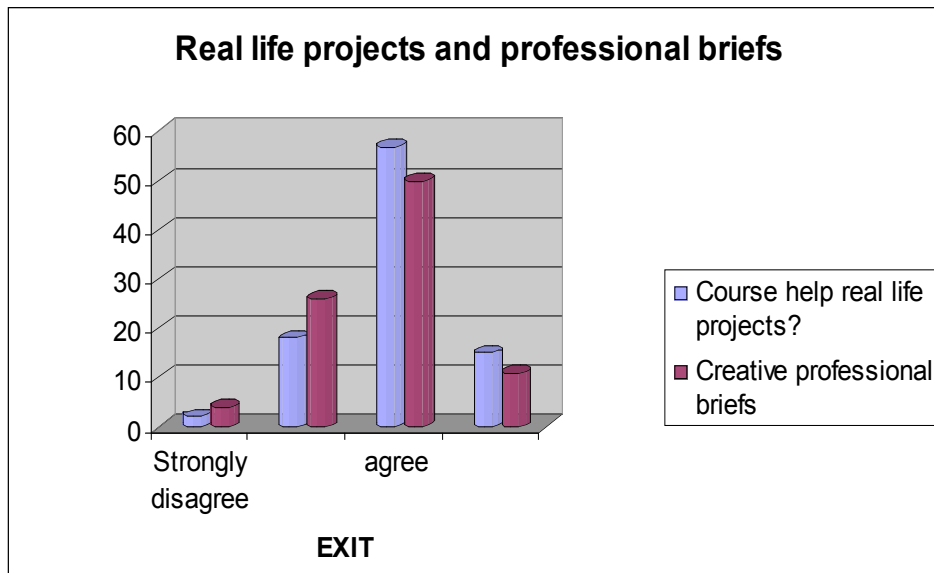


Fig 6

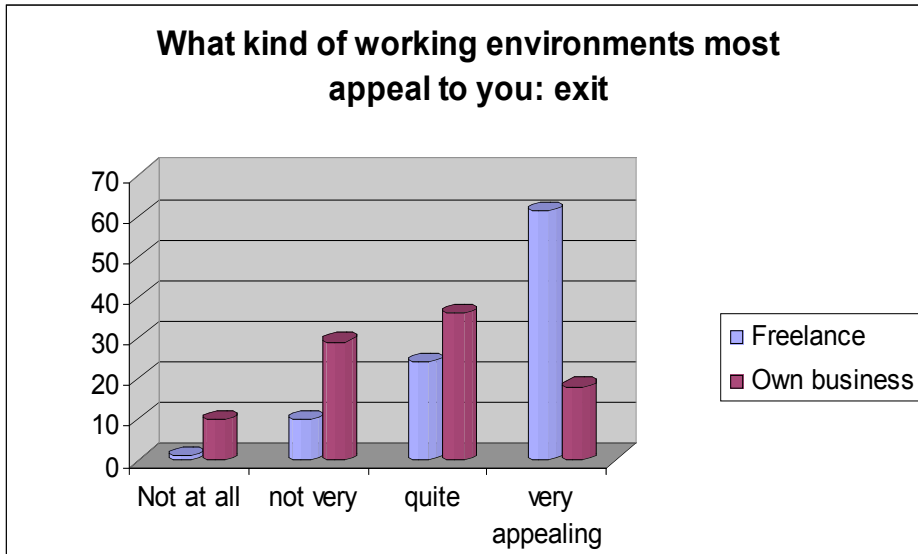


Fig 7

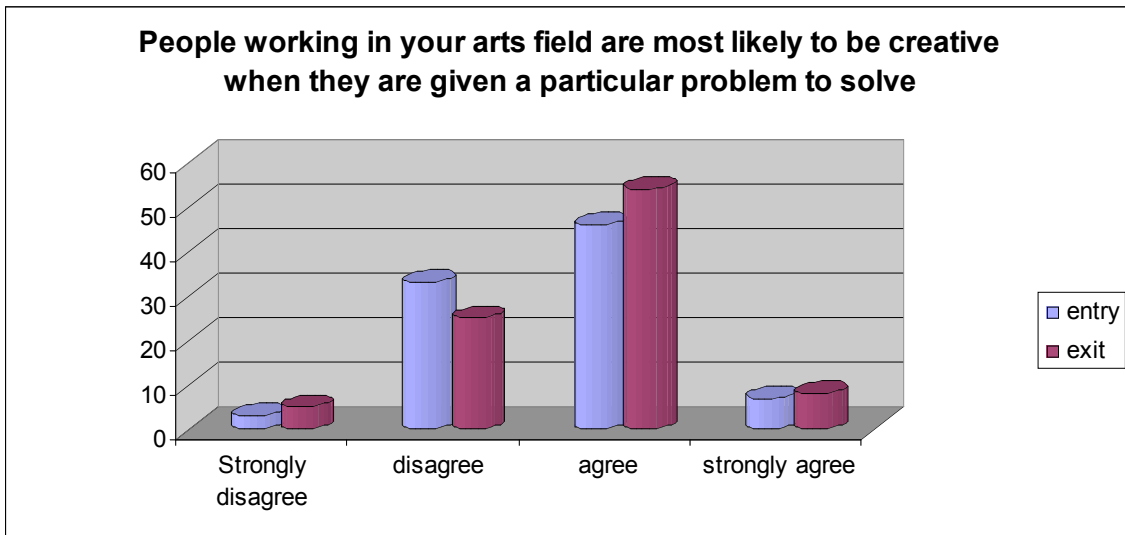
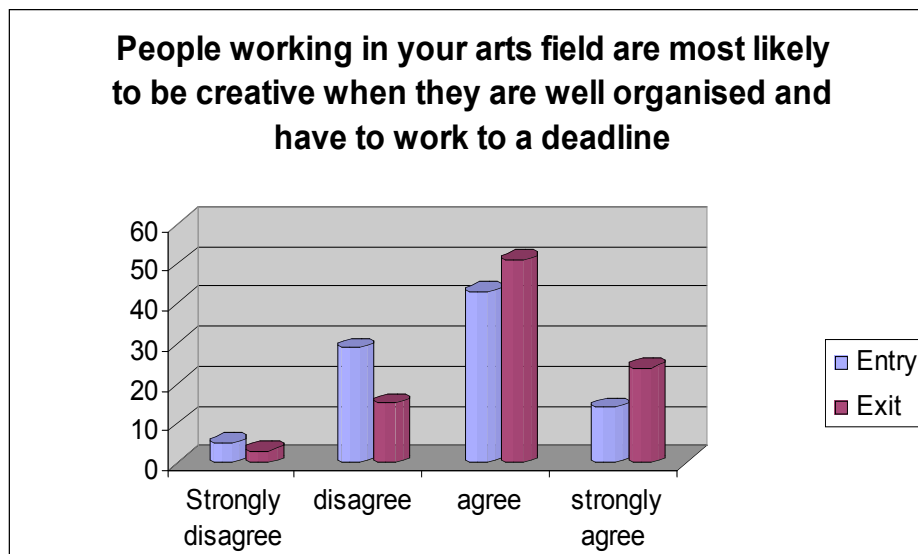


Fig 7



The answer would seem to be a limited “yes.” Fewer students felt the course had helped them to engage in ‘real life projects’ than wanted to pursue those projects on entry, but the alignment of these responses is now much closer to the ‘professional brief’ answers. Whatever the students’ views of projects and briefs, they can now see the connection between them.

Marginally fewer students now find the freelance life appealing (85% as opposed to 94% on entry) but there is still a glaring mismatch between the ‘freelance’ and ‘business’ answers. 61% find the freelance life very appealing: only 18% are similarly keen on running their own business. 30% still don’t see problem solving as conducive to their creativity. The ‘deadline’ responses do perhaps show a small victory for our course: 75% of students now see being well organised and working to deadlines as promoting creativity, compared to only 57% on entry.

These results suggest we there are areas of our students' education we should be attending to, but at the moment are not attending to adequately. It is my contention that it is our duty (at BSU at least) to make sure that our students:

1. have every opportunity to develop their own creativity within the course
2. are enabled to see guidelines and briefs not as restrictions, but as creative opportunities
3. understand the connection between freelance creative practice and running a business
4. have a clear and critical understanding of the way the writing industries (and other businesses) work
5. are made aware of the transferable skills they gain through active participation in the course
6. can use those skills to improve their prospects in whatever career they choose to follow.

Notes:

- (1) 'Student responses to Creative Writing: Coherence, Progression and Purpose,' soon to be available on the English Subject Centre website (www.english.heacademy.ac.uk)
- (2) Students are asked questions about their backgrounds and abilities, experiences and interests, aspirations and achievements. LASQ was especially designed to support the development of students' creativity, their ability to use new technologies, and their employability. My thanks are due to Antonia Walker, who coordinates the LASQ project for Artswork at Bath Spa University, for her help in supplying and analysing data. It must be stressed that as yet we don't have true longitudinal data. Entry and exit results come from two cohorts (2006 and 2007).

- This academic year we will be able to track the 2006 entry cohort on exit, and so get a real snapshot of what effects our course has (or hasn't) had.
- (3) Interestingly, only 29% of Art students claim to have had a job related to their subject since leaving school. English Literature students, who form a kind of "control" group (being the only subject included in LASQ not openly arts activity orientated) perhaps predictably score lowest on both the family and friends and related-job questions, at 29% and 15% respectively.
- (4) At this point I predict that most people involved in teaching Creative Writing who read these student responses will smile, and think "very interesting, but my students are different." That was the invariable reaction of academics shown the sample responses from other institutions before I surveyed their own students. However, on each occasion it turned out that their students were not materially different, and echoed (with some shifts of emphasis) the concerns and attitudes of their peers in other institutions. It is fair to say that for the seven institutions involved in the project at least, similarities of response far outweighed differences.