

University of New England

Jeremy Fisher

Using online workshopping to teach the writing of short fiction: at the threshold of digital pedagogy

Abstract:

Face-to-face workshopping is a favoured method of teaching creative writing and it has received significant attention as a pedagogical tool. Approximately 80% of the students studying writing at the University of New England (UNE) do so as online students. As face-to-face workshopping has been seen to be an integral tool in teaching the writing of fiction, this was an inhibition to including fiction units in UNE's repertoire. A new short fiction unit was introduced in 2014 that pioneered the use of online workshopping using selected forum groups on Moodle at UNE. This paper reports on the implementation of workshopping in the teaching of the writing of short fiction in an online environment where students have not met face to face and only interact in online forums. While the results overall were successful, there were some downsides when students found themselves outside their comfort zone or perplexed at the relative freedom of expression permitted in a unit where the assessment requirements were demonstration of their creative activity. Students were also encouraged to engage with a range of online activities separate from the forum groups and open to all. They took to these with gusto and the overall student satisfaction for the unit was very high.

Biographical note:

Dr Jeremy Fisher is Senior Lecturer in Writing and researches publishing and writing practice. Before taking up his academic appointment, Dr Fisher worked in the Australian publishing industry for many years as an editor, indexer, publisher and author. He was also Executive Director of the Australian Society of Authors from 2004 to 2009. He is the author of *Perfect timing*, *Music from another country* and *How to tell your father to drop dead*.

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Introduction

“I love these collaborative workshopping units so much. It is interesting to see how the story lands for each person individually, helps to create balance among many other things.” Comment from off-campus student.

The teaching of writing at the University of New England has been evolved as a holistic process with emphasis first on composition and writing for academic purposes, then on the use of writing in other modes and genres, some of which engage with forms of creative writing. Under the strong influence of the Iowa Writers’ Workshop, which famously gathered writing students together in a classroom or studio environment (McGurl, 2007), the pedagogy of creative writing has centred on the workshop and the critiquing of students’ work-in-progress. Though this model has been challenged (Kearns, 2009, Donnelly, 2010), the natural assumption has continued to be that creative writing is taught in physical classrooms on bricks-and-mortar campuses. Even when defined as a peer-review workshop, this form of pedagogy has been assumed to be a face-to-face process (Cowan, 2012).

Since the advent of the internet and online forms of communication, there has been some consideration of online engagement with writers. In one consideration of online writing pedagogy, Andrew (2012, 2014) has described a model of online delivery for an MA program that is structured around a 12-week teaching period. His model describes the building of a culture of trust, which is essential for the success of online teaching in general. Bolland (2012) has given details of the informal, though organised, online writing workshops in which he has participated over 20 years. He describes them as a form of Frierian ‘culture circle’ and the types of communities that run such workshops as follows:

“Firstly, they create environments where works in progress can be shared and critiqued, with the aim of improving the pieces and improving the authors’ skills. Secondly, they create environments incorporating expectations of participation (typically, there are formal expectations around critique-to-submission ratios, and/or informal expectations around reciprocity of effort). Thirdly, they create environments where ‘shop talk’ arising from the writing process can be discussed – for example, technical discussions around point-of-view, or discussions of the writing and publishing industry more broadly.”

Bolland's model comes closest to describing the practice on online teaching of writing described in this paper.

Freiman (2002) reported on two units successfully taught at Macquarie University, a metropolitan campus, that involved both on-campus and off-campus students using a WebCT platform to explore creative writing, and engaging in some online workshopping. This paper presents a further account of a creative writing exercise that illustrates online workshopping is not only possible and a rewarding experience, but also assists in bringing online students together into a 'virtual' community, interacting far more than in units which do not feature online workshopping.

The context and environment

The focus of writing pedagogy on the face-to-face workshop has posed problems for the teaching of creative writing when students are unable to be in a face-to-face teaching situation. The teaching of writing in the University of New England (UNE) School of Arts has been developed within a holistic approach, recognising the needs and demographics of the students for whom the university caters.

In 2013, UNE had a student enrolment of 21,365, of whom just over 95% were domestic (Australian residents) and 78.7% were enrolled as off-campus (or external) students. The total Australian university student cohort of 1,136,041 in 2013 had proportions of 77.2% domestic and 12.7% external (Department of Education, 2013). This is one indication of how UNE is a significant provider of distance education. Other relevant differences in the 2013 UNE student cohort were that 72.2% were aged over 25 years and 65.6% were female, compared to proportions respectively of 36.7% and 55.8% of total university students (UNE, 2014; Department of Education, 2013).

UNE occupies a unique position within the Australian tertiary education system. It is the oldest regional university, having been first established as a College of the University of Sydney in 1938 and operating as an independent institution since 1954. Thanks to its regional position, UNE has been at the forefront of distance education since its inception.

During the 20th century, teaching was conducted by correspondence, and students received slabs of printed material by mail to assist them with their studies. They also attended intensive schools, travelling to the main campus at Armidale in northern New South Wales to undertake an intensive period of lectures and seminars. Such schools are expensive for students and logistically difficult to program academically. The rapid development of the internet and digital technology in the 21st century had a significant impact on this print-and-mail based model, and offered an alternative for intensive schools. UNE now delivers instructional material via learning management systems (currently Moodle) and teaching can be conducted using a variety of online and digital technologies, though intensive schools are still used by a number of disciplines.

Implementation process

Writing units have been progressively rolled out as part of a review of delivery of the Bachelor of Media and Communications (BMC) in 2009 and in consultation with the Convener of the Bachelor of Arts (BA). Writing is a major in both the BMC and the BA. However, the BMC is contained within the School of Arts, while the BA involves several Schools.

The Writing Short Fiction unit was proposed as a possible new unit after the School of Arts had recruited a suitable complement of writing teachers. The unit was trialled in trimester 2, 2012, as an individual reading unit made up of a small group of on-campus students who were enthusiastic to work in a collaborative environment. Students worked with the Moodle system through which the use of online activities was explored and refined.

As a result of the successful trial, the unit was submitted for approval by the Academic Promotions Committee in 2013 and first taught in trimester 1, 2014. At 300 level (undergraduate), the unit proved popular: 125 students enrolled in it and 114 completed it, significant student numbers for a 300 level writing unit at UNE. There were 94 off-campus students, and 20 on-campus. The total attrition rate was 8.8% (10.5% for off-campus students and 0.0% for on-campus students). This compared favourably with a Trimester 1, 2014, attrition rate of 12.2% (15% off-campus; 2.1% on-campus) for the combined English Communications and Media discipline within which the unit was taught and a university-wide rate of 12.1% (15.3% off-campus; 2.0% on-campus). The unit was also offered at 500 level for MA coursework students, A total of 25 students enrolled (22 off-campus; 3 on-campus) and 18 (15

off-campus; 3 on-campus, two of whom were international students) completed the unit. At 500 level, the total attrition rate was 28% (31.8% off-campus; 0.0% on-campus), which seems high, but compares well with the total attrition rate of 29.8% (30.7% off-campus; 0.0% on-campus) for the English Communications and Media discipline within which the unit was taught.

The unit was delivered through UNE's current learning management system, Moodle. It was organised into nine topics to cover a twelve-week teaching period. Each topic contained a study guide. These were arranged in the following order: writing short fiction; basic story elements; characters; conflict; plot and structure; setting and atmosphere; narrative voice; point of view; and the exegesis. Both on-campus and off-campus students had access to Moodle and could engage with the online activities that were either original to the unit or adapted from sources such as Cowan (2011), Smith (2005) and Lucke (1999). The unit also had a prescribed textbook which was a collection of short fiction written by the unit coordinator and there were a number of activities included which related to some of the stories in this collection. One of these, which asked students to write 500 words from the viewpoint of a minor character in a story titled 'Winter afternoon', proved to be an activity completed by almost all students.

Flexibility was a key factor in the way the material was structured. Given the diverse nature of the off-campus student cohort, real-time tutorials using tools such as Adobe Connect are very difficult to implement. Most off-campus students access Moodle at night or during weekends. Hence the unit was structured so that material could be accessed at any time and activities could be completed at a pace, or in an order, determined by the student. To this end, off-campus students were advised that they could complete the unit at their own rate, and that there was no weekly schedule. This allowed students to work through the unit as they saw fit, most of them having full-time employment and family or other commitments. On-campus students attended weekly workshops structured around the study guide written for each topic. They also workshopped activities in class and participated in traditional weekly face-to-face workshops.

Off-campus students were also able to access several video podcasts in which the unit coordinator spoke further about some of the topics. The unit also featured video interviews with postgraduate writing students talking about their experience with writing fiction, answering questions related to the topics. Relevant readings were embedded within study guides and linked directly to UNE's Dixson Library electronic databases or to other freely accessible resources

such as *TEXT* and there were also links to appropriate publicly available videos and audio podcasts.

The assessment consisted of on-going engagement with at least 50% of the writing activities (30%) and the writing of a work of short fiction with an accompanying exegesis (70%). Word counts for the second assessment item varied for 300 and 500 level students (see Appendix for details of assessment and marking criteria).

Even though off-campus students were not required to immediately engage with the writing activities, they did so enthusiastically, many completing activities for the first three or four modules within the first week of the unit being made available to them online. Engaging in these activities meant students' work was available to others for comment and this helped give many students the confidence to enrol in online workshop forums and begin the process of online workshopping. Thanks to this, the majority of off-campus students quickly enrolled in these forums and began to engage in discussion of their proposed stories, exchanging drafts, and commenting on these drafts. In this way, similar environments to those Bolland (2012) describes were created in the majority of the online workshops developed in the unit. The building of such a culture was vital for online workshopping to be effective.

As an indication of this, off-campus students were given a time period to voluntarily enrol in workshop forums. If they had not done so at the end of this period, then they were assigned places in workshop forums by the unit coordinator. One of the clearest aspects of the unit was that those workshop forums that contained a majority of students so assigned did not function well, with little engagement in sharing stories or in providing comment on the work of other students. Students needed to feel comfortable and ease themselves into workshopping. The online workshops that worked best began with preliminary introductory online chats which included discussion of fears and trepidation. However, once one student had posted work for comment, the workshops came alive and students engaged in discussion. While the workshops were moderated by the unit coordinator, and guidance was offered from time to time, there was never an occasion for intervention by the coordinator to remove inappropriate comments or to deal with flame-outs.

Student experience and opinion

The unit's high retention rate has been discussed earlier, but students also expressed their pleasure with the way the unit was taught and how appreciative they were of the workshopping model in comments to the unit coordinator, some of which follow:

Learning about writing *from a writer* has been invaluable and being able to share our work within a supportive network has been great for overcoming the fear of putting writing out into the big, scary world. I really appreciate the feedback that everyone has given on my work and the supportive, friendly culture in the class.

I've loved the style of this unit ... as it gets us writing and putting things out there for others to see - hard to be a writer without doing this

This unit has been very interesting from the point of view of the creative writer -- learning from a writer, about creative writing.

A big thankyou from me also. It really has been a wonderful unit of study & active engagement with writing. In fact these past six months have probably been the hardest I've experienced on my home front with family illness, & this work has been such a welcome form of concentration.

I have found this unit to be confronting (personally) but satisfying, frustrating (again, personal) but you have encouraged me to work outside my comfort zone. I'm still somewhat surprised that I managed to write anything at all!

I found this unit to be a very safe, encouraging, supportive environment in which to work. Everyone was respectful and there was a lot of interaction- which is not always the case in forums I'm sure! I wish to thank everyone who made comments on my work, and everyone else who put their work up for me to read and learn from and make comment on myself. This has been a very enjoyable (though new and way out of my comfort zone!) experience.

Thanks so much for sharing about getting published, for being so readily available to answer our questions and for the links to the writing competitions, very very helpful and appreciated!!! Thanks also to all the students for being so actively involved on Moodle and for all the suggestions, comments, feedback and encouragement - it really has been a joy.

Students were also asked to complete a unit evaluation at the end of the unit. The evaluation was conducted by a third-party administrative section with the university. Twenty-seven of 91 online, 300-level students responded (30%). They gave the unit an overall satisfaction rating of 4.49/5, with 4.45/5 for the unit and 4.53/5 for the teaching.

When asked ‘What were the best aspects of this unit?’ students answered positively with regard to online workshopping forums. Some of the comments were:

Lots of forum/discussion interaction

Sharing our writing & receiving feedback for improvement

Being able to discuss our written pieces with other students; giving and receiving feedback.

Experiencing the work and ideas of others.

LOVE the workshopping structure, it means you receive a vast array of feedback on your work and it doesn’t all fall to the unit coordinator.

The ability to workshop my works of fiction was a unique opportunity.

The best aspects was [sic.] the quality teaching, quality resources and amount of opportunity for feedback and ability to work with other students.

I loved the online workshops ... these should be incorporated into more online units as it [sic.] really gave you a sense of teamwork and community.

The online forum interaction and using this portal for part of the assessment.

Conclusion

The implementation of a unit that incorporates online workshopping has proven to be a useful exercise in exploring and extending pedagogical possibilities in online teaching. As well, it has proved to be an exercise that was successful not just for the instructor and students but for the ongoing teaching of writing via online methods at UNE.

Appendix

300/500 Level Assignment 1 Off-campus students (on campus students participated in face-to-face workshops)

Weight: 30%

Length: equivalent to 1000 words (2000 words for 500 level)

Due date: ongoing throughout trimester

Submission format: in the online forums, but students will submit a self-evaluation form at the end of the trimester. The form will be considered, however the final mark will be at the discretion of the unit coordinator.

Assignment Instructions

This unit introduces students to writing short fiction. Using workshopping techniques, students will explore a number of writing skills, as well as reading some short works of fiction and commenting on them.

Throughout the trimester, unit activities will be posted online and students are expected to engage with at least 50% of these.

Marking criteria

The criteria that will be used in marking this assignment include:

Evidence of engaging with the writing activities and methods for studying them introduced in the unit.

- Evidence of an engagement with other readers (fellow students) of your work, and evidence of your engagement with their work.
- Coherence of writing, structure, character, and style and ability to create a short work of fiction.
- Quality of written expression and formal presentation, including grammar, punctuation, referencing, where appropriate, and ability to work effectively within the word limits.

30/500 Level Assignment 2 On and Off-campus students

Weight: 70%

Length: 3000 words total (4000 for 500 level)

2500 words fiction (3250 for 500 level)

500 words exegesis (750 for 500 level)

Due date: End trimester

Assignment instructions

There are two parts to this Assignment.

1. The first requires you to write a creative short fiction work in a genre of your choice.
2. The second requires you to write an exegesis, or reflection, on the creative work. You should consider the following interrelated factors in your exegesis:

- The authorial purpose and point of view evident in the work
- The use of techniques of composition (eg narrative, exposition, characterisation, development of themes) to treat the topic
- The forms of knowledge mobilised in the work, and evidence of any way in which research informs the writing
- Any ethical issues that arose for you as a writer
- How the work relates to the readings that have also been central to this course.

Please feel free to email or otherwise contact the coordinator if you wish to discuss your assignment plan, or any questions you may have.

Marking criteria

The criteria that will be used in marking this assignment include:

- Evidence that you understand the fiction writing skills and techniques used in your creative work (in the exegesis).
- Evidence of your use of writing techniques and skills explored in the unit, demonstrating use of style, characterisation, narrative voice, plot, and point of view.
- Evidence of your use of varieties of language to treat your topic.
- Evidence of understanding of key ideas about the genre of short fiction and methods for studying it that have been presented in the unit (in the exegesis).
- Evidence of engagement with readers through workshopping of drafts of the work.
- Coherence of analysis, essay structure, and ability to make succinct use of examples to support general points.
- Quality of written expression and formal presentation, including grammar, punctuation, referencing, where appropriate, and ability to work effectively within the word limits.

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