



# JOURNAL OF Perspectives in Applied Academic Practice

## The Desire for Justice and the Desire for the Unknown: Field Notes on the Creation of a Transformative Creative Writing MA Community

Sam Kelly and Errol Rivera

Edinburgh Napier University

### ABSTRACT HEAD

Reinventing the MA in Creative Writing at Edinburgh Napier University using student-staff collaboration. Situated within Higher Education's ongoing conversations about co-operative learning and student engagement, this piece proposes the experience of its authors as the possible basis of a methodology for community creation: one that can be used by any taught postgraduate programme as a means of redefining and strengthening its sense of purpose.

**Keywords:** creative writing; student-staff collaboration; academic practice; higher education; co-operative learning; curriculum development.

We offer the following in the spirit of explorers, those who found themselves in what English cartographers once called *parts unknown*. We've made land, of that we're certain, but only just. So, in advance of detailed maps, accurate surveys, and all other informative tracts, we submit to you: a description, wholly coloured by the experience of the journey.

### Departure

We set out last May, in the direction of student-staff collaboration. This was *terra cognita*: the ground long proven fertile for co-operative learning (Slavin, 1995), peer teaching (Boud, 2001), and student engagement with curriculum development (Bovill, 2011).

In this territory, our enterprise seemed assured. There was a problem in the design of the Creative Writing MA at Edinburgh Napier University, involving our practice of one-to-one editorial mentoring. Longstanding but tacit, mentoring needed to be brought into the official course structure. But how? Some students were invited to help find a solution.

The working group of six students – including the second co-author – were, at the time, immersed in their Major Projects. The Programme Leader – the first co-author – provided a brisk workshop in the principles of constructive alignment, a guide to the requirements of Quality, and piles of flipchart paper. The students set to – formulating questions, reminding themselves of the programme's core values, and sketching every possibility they could invent.

Of course, our students are crazily good at invention – but in a very particular way, which might explain our unexpected destination. One of the primary philosophical co-ordinates for the course is Lyotard's (1984) concept of the language game. We use it to question creative motivations: as a prompt to identify and disrupt unexamined assumptions; a reminder of the political nature of innovation; an invitation to the sheer pleasure of purposeful mischief. Seeing the programme's teaching applied to the programme itself was startling – and incredibly fun. Right in front of our eyes,

curriculum design became an avant-garde creative writing exercise.

Then, something occurred. The students became invested in the process, and their reflections grew in sophistication. As they developed a shared language, their ambitions became radically articulated; their solutions to the problem more challenging. They began to think like seriously innovative teachers, not crazily inventive students. Days later, the outcome was a wholesale reinvention at the programme's core: two new modules, framed by student-created learning agreements and intricately flexible assessment pathways. As a design it was brilliant – one module even featured three hours of gloriously undefined learning space every fortnight.

This might have been the end of the journey. The Programme Leader sped the new programme structure through Quality; and the students went back to their Major Projects reinvigorated by the experience. Thinking about teaching is surprisingly valuable to novel writing, as this group's MA results proved.

But something else had happened, too. For a while, we hadn't been a tutor and some students, but a collective. The joy we'd found in this mutual work, the new energy released, and the deep learning we'd all achieved, was inspiring. Not only did we wish to keep it – we wanted more. Those three hours per fortnight of uncharted space became our next destination.

### Here Be Dragons

Etymologically, the word 'intern' does not confer joy on the bearer, but confinement. Nebulous as our initial idea was, this is definitely not what we had in mind. We imagined members of this soon-to-be-graduating group occupying the undefined territory in a spirit of free creativity; continuing their practice of invention beyond the hypothetical and into the delivery of teaching and learning. The project would not be peer teaching, and nor would it conform to the traditional GTA model. It would be a total immersion in the live co-creation of a new version of the MA.

There's a fine line between fruitful risk taking – the kind which

navigates unpredictable opportunities with courageous vision and caring skill – and random acts of amateurism, perpetrated upon fee-paying students in a spirit of negligent egotism. We recently described our experiment at a conference, where we invited delegates to imagine the worst that could happen if they tried this on their own programmes. The scenarios were terrifying: academic collapse, reputational freefall, psychological damage.

These were the risks we ran, but not the risks we encountered. As we approach the end of our first year, a report of overwhelming student satisfaction, deepened learning, accredited professional development and life-enhancing transformation seems slightly preposterous, even to us. But there's an explanation, and it's the initial student working group. The quality of that experience meant that, even though we didn't have a clue what was going to happen, we knew what we were doing.

Which is not to discount the pitfalls. Maintaining freedom from conventional role-hierarchies meant establishing untested working methods. When the new students arrived, we struggled to explain to them the nature of the experiment; to gain their partnership. We strove to maintain mutual trust and openness during periods of overwhelm. When the Programme Leader's spare budget ran out we battled for funding; when the second author's visa expired we fought for that too. Over exhilarating months of constant co-creation we each faced the unexpected, in the shape of our own personal limitations and fears.

Through all of which, three teaching interns – with close support but absolutely no direct supervision – invented a new pedagogy at the heart of our MA. The methods they created were entirely their own; the fruits of their unique relationship with the students. In the process, the position previously occupied by the programme team was radically displaced: every fortnight brought new surprises, and the challenge to tutors was to join the conversation; respond to the knowledge produced; make their own inventive moves in a game they no longer controlled.

## Landfall

So, where are we now? After all this perilous journeying, what's the territory we declared ourselves so keen to describe?

We think we're in land adjacent to our favourite inspirations: the Student as Producer movement (Neary, 2010) and the SSC in Lincoln, pioneers of a fully co-operative model of higher education (Winn, 2014). What we can see on the horizon is the potential to create social value beyond the particular circumstance of the university – but also, some features closer to hand.

The MA will never be the same again, and neither will we. Crucially, the MA will never be replicated in any two years of delivery – and this observation brings us close to some of the implications.

The word 'community' features in our title, but it's one we've begun to find troublesome. In *Situated Learning: Legitimate Peripheral Participation*, Lave and Wenger (1991) describe the formational process by which a newcomer enters a community, gradually learning its defining practices towards fully competent membership. This requires – at the very least – a pre-existing community, with established modes of doing and experienced elders to guide the novice across the threshold. Yet what we created at the outset was simply a

space, defined only by its liminality. And when we (tutors, interns and students) entered this intern-space, we did so as co-founders and novices alike, all on the threshold of the unknown.

A community implies qualities of stability and growth. But the intern-space is characterised by radical provisionality. As teaching and learning, its practices and influence are a dialogue which cannot outlast the live voices of those involved; it will be created anew every time. The constantly shifting territory we're calling an internship articulates our deepest ambitions for the MA: to attend to the authentic human energies of its present participants; to create unforeseeable outcomes; to seek change.

Which brings us to the subject of justice. Earlier this year, we attended a conference entitled *Kindness, Care and Love: Exploring the Hinterlands of Active Learning Relationships in Education*. This wove together all the themes that most inspire us – justice, joy, risk and human-ness – towards a powerful restatement of the purpose of education in increasingly capitalised universities. It also brought us back to Lyotard (1984) with fresh eyes.

In speaking of the internship as an act of deliberate displacement, what we're really describing is Lyotard's philosophy of the social bond – a concept which may be even more necessary than communities to the future of transformative innovation in educational practice. For Lyotard, the language game defines the social bond. By resisting consensus in favour of a proliferation of innovative temporary agreements amongst localised and provisional narrative players, the language game may be our best weapon against totalisation.

If we take the deliberate enactment of the language game as our educational role, the institutional discourse of graduate attributes shifts from the performative to the ethical. The free co-creation of liminal spaces of practice within the institution involves a decision – by everyone involved – to assume personal responsibility for the rules created and their effects. Involvement in this process engenders, in turn, a radical optimism: if the potential of the social bond can be experienced here, then the circumstances can be created throughout our lives and work. This is what we hope participants take with them to their futures. In Lyotard's words, the language game "sketches the outline of a politics that would respect both the desire for justice and the desire for the unknown".

Finally – and extremely provisionally – we would like to propose our experience as the basis for a transformative method which could be used by taught postgraduate programmes anywhere. We're currently convinced that Creative Writing isn't the crucial ingredient: for any discipline, this practice of creating space for unpredictable intervention could bring you startlingly close to whatever it is you're really trying to do – as a teacher of your subject, and as a human in the world.

But, as we said at the beginning, we only just got here. Any minute now, we may discover these parts are not unknown at all, but already energetically occupied by fellow adventurers. We hope so! We'd love to hear from anyone who would like to continue the conversation.

## Biographies

Sam Kelly and Errol Rivera co-work on the MA in Creative Writing at Edinburgh Napier University. Sam's official title is Programme Leader; Errol's is Teaching Intern and Research Assistant.

## References

- Boud, D., Cohen, R. & Sampson, J. (Eds). (2001). *Peer learning in higher education: Learning from and with each other*. London: Kogan Page.
- Bovill, C., Cook-Sather, A. & Felten, P. (2011). Students as co-creators of teaching approaches, course design and curricula: Implications for academic developers. *International Journal for Academic Development*, 16(2).
- McArthur, J. (2014). *Kindness, Care and Love: Exploring the Hinterlands of Active Educational Relationships*. Retrieved from <http://bit.ly/1ng4sEs>.
- Lave, J. and Wenger, E. (1991). *Situated Learning: Legitimate Peripheral Participation*. Cambridge: CUP.
- Lyotard, J. (1984). *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*. Manchester: MUP.
- Neary, M. (2010). Student as Producer: A Pedagogy for the AvantGarde; or, How do Revolutionary Teachers Teach? *Learning Exchange*, 1(1).
- Slavin, R. E. (1995). *Cooperative Learning: Theory, Research and Practice*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Winn, J. (2014). Is the worker co-operative form suitable for a university? Available from <http://josswinn.org/2014/03/>