

Tabor Adelaide

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Teaching creative writing by distance education: how effective is it?

Abstract:

It is generally understood that external students are disadvantaged in the learning of Creative Writing, at least in part because of the workshop-based nature of most Creative Writing programs. This study seeks to measure the extent of this disadvantage, if any, by the use of quantitative and qualitative data sourced from a purpose-designed survey and from student assessment outcomes. Students studying on campus and by distance education were surveyed and their academic results examined to assess if there were measurable differences in satisfaction and outcomes, and, if so, which factors, of those noted in the literature, give rise to the greatest concerns. The results demonstrated that while external students do indeed appear to suffer poorer outcomes, satisfaction levels are not significantly different from internal students. The primary areas of concern—timeliness of feedback, staff accessibility and building a learning community—will be addressed in future course design, particularly as the college moves into full online delivery. Monitoring student satisfaction and outcomes on a routine basis will enable future assessment as to whether student outcomes improve as these issues receive attention.

Biographical notes:

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Keywords:

External studies—Creative writing—Student outcomes—Student satisfaction—Undergraduate—Postgraduate

Introduction

In an age of computer literacy, flexible study options and irregular work hours there are few areas of tertiary study which are not available via external mode. A remarkable exception to this is the area of Creative Writing. A frequently encountered assumption is that students undertaking Creative Writing externally will be significantly disadvantaged in comparison to internal students due to the nature of the subject matter and the workshop method by which it is taught. Offering the same subjects regularly to both internal and external students, the Creative Writing Department at Tabor Adelaide is in a good position to assess the validity of these assumptions. Specifically, the study we have undertaken is designed to determine to what extent, if any, external students are disadvantaged in comparison with internal students. It is hoped that the study will help us not only to identify any areas of deficiency in the external delivery of Creative Writing subjects, but will indicate ways in which the delivery of these subjects might be improved.

The institutional context of the study

Tabor Adelaide is an interdenominational Christian-based tertiary institution offering fully accredited courses at both undergraduate and postgraduate levels. Through its Humanities Faculty, Tabor Adelaide has offered Creative Writing at the undergraduate level since 2005 and at the postgraduate level since the end of 2006. In 2007 both undergraduate and post-graduate programs began to be offered externally. Individual internal subjects within the program attract anywhere from 40 students (semester one 2008 Introduction to Creative Writing) to as few as 8 students in more specialised subjects.

Review of the literature

Research-wise, this study breaks new ground. In reviewing the literature, therefore, the focus was on: (1) theories of creativity and Creative Writing pedagogy, and (2) studies related to distance education, bringing the findings from each field into conversation so as to clarify the context of the present study, identify questions for investigation, and establish a set of criteria for evaluating and developing Tabor Adelaide's external Creative Writing program. The results of this extensive literature review are summarised here.

The literature reveals that Creative Writing, as a discipline, has been informed by an evolving conception of creativity. Swander, Leahy & Cantrell document the foundations of the Iowa Writers Group, observing that it was informed by the Romantic myth of the creative writer as a uniquely inspired individual, according to which 'talent is inherent', and 'inspiration not education drives creativity' (2007: 15). Of course, such a view invites the challenge that if creativity cannot be taught, Creative Writing has no standing as an academic discipline.

In response to this challenge, a more variegated theory of creativity has been sought. Of particular note is the work of Csikszentmihlyi (1999), whose theory of creativity

sees both the individual writer and the cultural community coming together in the creative process. Likewise, Abbs (1989) sets forth a theory of creativity as arising from the indissoluble interplay between the conscious and unconscious, between cultural tradition and self-expression. Such conceptions appear to have been widely accepted. For instance, Brophy suggests that creativity emerges ‘in a contest between excitement and ideas, between intellect and emotion’ (2009: 55), and he defends the writing workshop as the dynamic context in which such a contest is played out.

Indeed, the writing workshop has remained the constant element in Creative Writing pedagogy, supported on all fronts by various conceptions of creativity, the findings of cognitive science and social learning theory (Swander et al 2007; Freiman 2002), and the enduring belief that since ‘good writers are good readers’, literary criticism is a vital part of teaching craft. In the writing workshop, teaching craft involves the study of model texts (or established forms), turning to critical interrogation of one’s own and each other’s writing, and leads to continual revision and editing (LaFemina 2006).

To summarise, contemporary approaches to teaching Creative Writing are informed by an increasingly nuanced understanding of creativity, giving rise to a predominant, multi-faceted writing-workshop approach. This approach values a high degree of interactivity and face-to-face contact. Further, the high level of critical interrogation and revision sought in the workshop are developed over time and within a community of trust and mutual interest. With these points in mind, it remains to consider how effectively distance learning approaches might facilitate the teaching of Creative Writing.

The burgeoning phenomenon of e-learning, and increased demand for alternatives to on-campus modes of study, has yielded considerable research, focussed mainly on practical aspects of implementing external studies (e.g. Menchaca & Bekele 2008; Housego & Freeman 2000; Brown & Voltz 2005; Aragon, Johnson & Shaik 2002; Weaver, Spratt & Nair 2008). Some studies, however, have contrasted distance and on-campus approaches, highlighting important implications for teaching and learning in humanities and the creative disciplines (e.g. Natsina 2007; Richardson 2009).

For instance, a key finding of the research is that face-to-face instruction needs somehow to be facilitated or else replicated as part of distance learning approaches (Menchaca & Bekele 2008; Richardson 2009; Natsina 2007). Price, Richardson & Jelfs stress that ‘online contexts are severely impoverished from a communication perspective, and tutors and students need to be trained to compensate for the lack of paralinguistic information through their use of verbal cues’ (2007: 82).

Likewise, Natsina suggests that ‘[t]he guided interpersonal exchange that takes place in classes...seems indispensable for the development of that complex set of critical abilities which...is traditionally understood to be acquired through a form of apprenticeship’ (2007: 132). In a survey of distance and online literature studies programs, Natsina found that however sophisticated the technology employed, face-to-face meetings remained essential for community building, resolving technical difficulties, and as an extension of workshop-type interactions.

An important conclusion from the above is that the successful use of online technology in distance education, especially when seeking to compensate for lack of

face-to-face contact, requires teachers to modify their pedagogy by adopting new strategies and being trained in the use of specialised equipment (Aragon, Johnson & Shaik 2002). Most studies indicate that, in principle, distance education presents no barrier to learning success, provided teaching staff and students are experienced and well-trained in the use of related technology, that course content and methods of instruction are designed in accord with sound pedagogy, and that a high level of personal, technical and administrative support (including some avenue for face-to-face interaction) is provided. This is a significant list of provisos, but it seems that their provision should enable Creative Writing to be taught effectively via external studies.

Although research into teaching Creative Writing via distance learning is scarce, a number of pertinent commentaries exist. Conway-Herron & Morgan (2009) have reported their trial of a ‘converged’ or ‘blended learning’ delivery of two units in the Creative Writing program at Southern Cross University. Briefly, many internal students felt ‘cheated’ by the elimination of weekly lectures and substitution of online workshopping for face-to-face opportunities. While remaining positive about the potential of the trialled approach, the researchers conclude: ‘teaching in a converged mode makes complex demands on teachers, and requires confident mastery of a range of technologies.’

Andrew (2009: 4-5) has reported on the use of threaded discussion forums to establish e-communities in the teaching of Writing in an online MA at Swinburne University. Throughout, he stresses that such virtual environments need to be ‘regularly facilitated, monitored and mediated by the instructor, who also offers individual and generic feedback and encourages fruitful collaborations’. Getting distance learners to ‘invest’ in the online process, therefore, seems dependent on a high level of expert interpersonal contact between instructor and student.

Conclusions from the literature

The literature reveals tension between (1) established Creative Writing pedagogy, centred on the writing-workshop and a high degree of face-to-face interaction, and (2) the contested feasibility of teaching creative arts and literature-based subjects via distance modes. The means to overcoming this tension appear to involve the diligent and creative application of communication technologies, coupled with related professional development and effective course design.

From the literature, principles of effective distance learning design include:

- The need to consider student demographics (since experience with computer and Internet related technology is often a precursor of learning success)
- Using a range of media, such as email, online forums, printed, video and audio resources
- Establishing some dimension of face-to-face or one-on-one contact between students and teachers

The above considerations were used to refine the research questions and to interpret the research data. They will also serve as a guide to evaluating and developing Tabor Adelaide's approach to distance education, in Creative Writing.

Research methodology

This project utilises three sources of data, two quantitative and one qualitative: satisfaction ratings, student grades, and responses to open-ended questions.

The anonymous paper-based survey included three parts: demographic questions; Likert-type rating scales for responses to questions concerning specific elements of the subject matter, staff and facilities; and open-ended questions concerning positive and negative experiences in studying the subject, and general comments.

The students surveyed had completed a Creative Writing subject internally or externally during 2009. These subjects, all offered in both modes, were: Introduction to Creative Writing, Writing for Children, Prose, Poetry, and Editing and Publishing for Writers. Of these, the first three were also available online, but no assignments were submitted or marked via the online portal. Only four of the subjects are included in the results of the survey, as there were no external Prose respondents.

The other source of quantitative data used in this study is students' final grades for the five subjects within the scope of the project. The use of student grades, that is, performance rather than level of satisfaction, is an often overlooked source of information in the literature on distance education. The use of such data in this study addresses a common methodological weakness.

The same markers graded both internal and external assignments in each subject, so any variations in grade averages within a subject are likely to be caused by student differences. There were a handful of students who were awarded F2 (40% or less) and were therefore excluded from the study. While there is an argument to suggest that such a low level of achievement may reflect on the nature or quality of the course on offer, there are many other reasons for students to fail. Most of the Creative Writing students whose F2 grades were discounted in this study submitted no assignments; therefore their failure was understood to be a late withdrawal.

Data analysis: quantitative data

Response rates: The total number of internal surveys (study units rather than students as persons) delivered was 69, with 50 returned, an overall response rate of 73.9%. The total number of external surveys delivered was 34, with 19 returned, an overall response rate of 55.9%. These rates are similar to other university survey response rates (Collings and Ballantyne, n.d.).

Demographic results: The demographic profiles of internal and external respondents vary most in the areas of age, gender and current level of enrolment. The largest group of internal students is 18-24 years, whereas the distribution of external students bulges at the 35-54 bracket. While males make up a significantly smaller segment of the internal student population, only 5% of external students are male. The internal

respondents are evenly spread across undergraduate and postgraduate studies with majors in a variety of disciplines, whereas the external respondents are primarily enrolled in a Bachelors degree with a Creative Writing major.

Average ratings—overall: The ratings for all subjects and both modes were generally highly positive. This is partially a product of social desirability and acquiescence biases typical of rating scale responses (Groves et al 2004: 155, 208). Nevertheless, after averaging the responses, there were small differences noted between subjects (indicating possible differences in lecture quality and style) and to certain questions in the survey.

No differences were noted for online versus traditional delivery. Online students' areas of concern were similar to those of other external respondents.

Average ratings—by subject: Looking at the average ratings by subject across all questions, it appears that the greatest divergence between internal and external satisfaction occurred in Poetry. This is understandable given that poetry, of all Creative Writing forms, is the most aurally-dependent. Unfortunately this divergence could not be tested statistically as there were too few respondents.

Average ratings—by question:

Questions were tested for significance when the averages within a subject revealed a difference. Only one subject turned out to have significant differences at the question level: Introduction to Creative Writing. Here it was revealed that internal students were relatively unhappy with resources available and quality of feedback. Given that these are both more readily available for internal students than external, it would seem that another factor is at play here. One likely cause is student expectations.

In summary, the survey ratings show:

1. The majority of students, both internal and external, were well-satisfied with their learning experiences.
2. Overall, more external students were less satisfied than internal students but the differences were small.
3. Of the subjects surveyed where numbers were sufficient for reasonably reliable comparisons to be made, Poetry students exhibited the greatest divergence in satisfaction levels.
4. The issues of most concern to external students were usefulness of textbooks, and staff availability, whereas the issues of most concern to internal students were availability of resources and quality of feedback provided. Both sets of students shared a concern regarding timeliness of feedback.

Student grades

Overall, internal students achieved consistently higher grades than external students. Again, differences were small. When aggregating results from the five subjects surveyed, external students scored on average 3.84 percentage points lower than their internal counterparts. (One subject, however, showed no difference (Prose)). The

greatest difference between external and internal students occurred at postgraduate level, where external students averaged 4.9 percentage points lower, whereas undergraduates only varied by -1.46 percentage points. Interestingly, the difference between internal undergraduate and postgraduate students was 5.61 percentage points (i.e. the variation within internal students was greater than the variation between students of different delivery modes). These results can be seen in Figure 1.

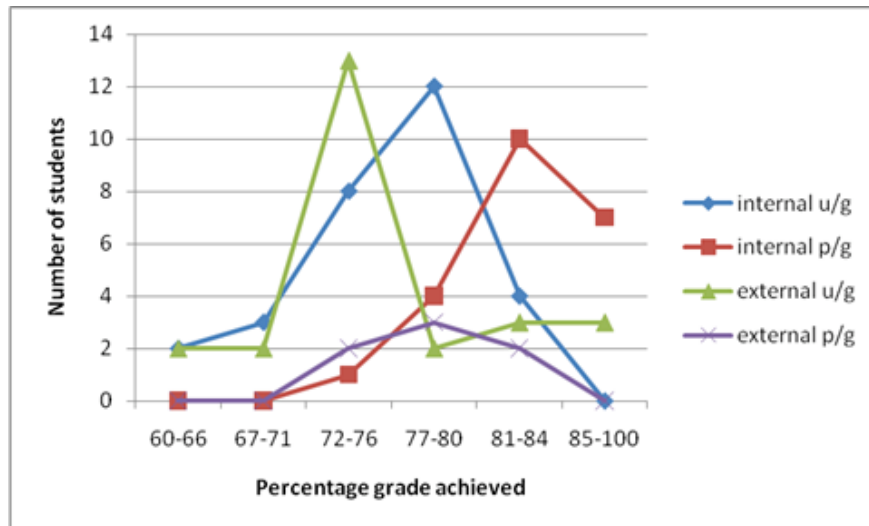


Figure 1. Student grades achieved across all Creative Writing subjects

On viewing the data by subject, there were similar levels of variation. Two subjects had sufficient respondents to make internal-external comparisons with tests for significance. External students received significantly lower grades in both Introduction to Creative Writing, and Writing for Children. These were taught by different staff. It can be reasonably assumed, therefore, that external students typically receive significantly lower grades across the whole range of Creative Writing subjects.

The number of external postgraduates was small and the variance higher than for any other group, making it difficult to draw definite conclusions. On the face of it, however, the results for external postgraduates do not seem encouraging.

Summary of quantitative data: Do the different sources of quantitative data tell the same story? Both sources agree that external students, on the whole, are slightly disadvantaged. Satisfaction levels are generally similar for students in both modes of study, but grades suggest that nevertheless external students do not benefit as much as on-campus students in assessment outcomes. Demographic factors may account for these differences. On some specific issues to do with learning experience, there were some surprises when internal students displayed less satisfaction in spite of higher grades on average than their external counterparts.

Data analysis: qualitative data

Open-ended responses could be grouped by the following themes:

Learning community: A significant number of internal students (approx 40%) mentioned the positive experience and perceived benefits of interacting and learning from their peers in a workshop setting. No respondents reported any negative perception of the writing-workshop approach, while none of the nineteen external respondents mentioned any peer learning experiences.

Feedback: Nearly half of the external respondents indicated concern over the lack of feedback in time to revise drafts and prepare future assignments. This compares with only seven of the internal respondents who raised similar concerns. This contrasts with the ratings results, where internal and external respondents were almost equally concerned at slow return of marked work. These figures are arguably a reflection of the fact that, in many subjects, use of the online course for student-tutor communication has yet to be fully developed. They may also signal the need for an alternative approach to processing assignments.

Teaching staff: Fifteen internal students made positive mention of their teacher's expertise and/or enthusiasm. By comparison, only one external student offered a similar response. Other responses mentioned the need for face-to-face contact with their tutors. These responses support the findings in the literature about distance learning needing to facilitate some face-to-face dimension, as well as the need to utilise a range of media for teaching and communication.

Resources: Five internal students suggested the written assignment instructions they received were ambiguous, while external students reported no particular issues.

Other responses: Five internal students and three external students volunteered that they felt they had advanced their writing skills through their study. Only one (internal) student expressed dissatisfaction in this regard.

Conclusions from the research

This study confirms what the literature on distance education suggests, that external students may suffer some disadvantage, which can be seen here in their engagement in the learning process and in their results. What practices could be adopted to improve the learning experience and outcomes for external students studying Creative Writing?

External students indicated specific concerns about the usefulness of textbooks, staff availability and timeliness of feedback, all of which relate to the challenges of learning a subject taught primarily by a workshop approach in the absence of direct, face-to-face interaction. Textbook learning becomes more necessary when there is no feedback from peers in a workshop setting, while teacher feedback is diminished when relying on indirect methods of contact (email or telephone). Timeliness of feedback is clearly crucial for students not receiving in-class feedback from their teachers or peers. Subsumed in this issue is the fact that those participating in workshops are likely to receive more feedback on formative tasks than those studying

externally. Clearly textbooks need to be chosen with the needs of external students in mind. However, if textbooks are acting as *de facto* tutors, the textbook itself may not be the real issue. Close tutor-student connections—regular and individual—need to be formed. Current technologies provide a range of options.

These issues confirm research by Hara and Kling (1999), who found that two of the most persistent frustrations for distance learners in an online context are lack of prompt feedback and ambiguous instructions. Factors described by Menchaca and Bekele (2008) also bear similarity to the present research. Technology-related issues appear, from this study, to be not so much about computer literacy, but of finding computer-mediated ways of replicating the benefits of the writing-workshop. Nevertheless, student responses show that some, age notwithstanding, have trouble accessing resources which rely on high speed or large Internet downloads. As Tabor Adelaide goes fully online, equity issues for technologically disadvantaged students require the use of a range of teaching media.

Another factor Menchaca and Bekele note is course design. Recognising the distinctive problems faced by external students, the onus is on lecturers to develop their online courses effectively. Students need opportunities for synchronised and asynchronous group activities that enable immediate feedback on formative exercises and opportunities to measure their own efforts against others’.

This links to Menchaca and Bekele's fourth factor, motivation. Some students admit that their motivation to engage is increased by the presence of others doing the same work. For these students, external study can be a sure road to failure. Finding ways to provide a sense of belonging to a learning community is crucial to their success. Many authors value a writers' network because of the insular nature of writing. Some external students can find this on the Internet or by associating with a local writing group, but for most internal students this social network begins with their fellow students. Developing strong links between external students would give them the same opportunity.

For external students in need of social motivation, it may be beneficial to discuss these issues prior to enrolment. As Conway-Herron and Morgan (2009) note, high dropout rates occur among external Creative Writing students. Although it has not been measured in this study, withdrawing from a course or failing by non-participation could be an additional measure of the capacity of Creative Writing programs to adequately engage external students. This warrants further research.

The final factor that needs to be addressed in the external delivery of Creative Writing, again in line with Menchaca and Bekele (2008), is adequate support services. Student responses indicate that a greater sense of contact with teachers is needed. Time for regular individual student contact needs to become a recognised component of teaching staff workloads. Prompt feedback is a crucial form of student support. One way of streamlining the return of marked work and other feedback is for all formative and assessed tasks to be done online. It is likely that this will be implemented for Creative Writing at Tabor Adelaide as it has in other faculties. Student support is even more necessary as these technological changes take place. All of this presupposes adequate staff training in the use of appropriate technologies.

While this paper has focused on improving outcomes for external students, it is nevertheless clear from this research that Creative Writing can be taught effectively by distance education at both the undergraduate and postgraduate levels. External students are not far behind their internal peers, and by ongoing assessment of teaching methods and outcomes, it is hoped that external students will soon experience the same success and satisfaction as their internal counterparts.

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Further information

Further details of this research are available in the full paper prepared for the Australian Learning and Teaching Council at the Tabor Adelaide website: <http://www.adelaidetabor.edu.au>