

RMIT University

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If you don't have skin, you're not there: new literatures, hash tag poetry (#poetry) and writing students

Abstract:

This paper makes an argument for the inclusion of new technologies in the creative writing repertoire of pedagogies, in particular the social networking site Twitter. Learning how to compose 140 character poems and nanofictions exercises the imagination and writing skill. It is surprising how much can be conveyed in such a small space; when they're good, the exchange becomes physical: poetry as food. Utilising so-called 'Twitterverse' inside and outside the classroom is a way of building an active writing community, a positive environment of learning, practice and publication. It is a way of engaging the Net Generation of students we have in our classrooms with runaway fictions and now-you-see-it-now-you-don't poetry that, as John Gardner might argue, creates a dream in the reader's minds, a dream that is both vivid and continuous.

Biographical note:

Dr Francesca Rendle-Short is a novelist, essayist and academic. She is the author of the novel *Imago* and the novella *Big Sister* (Redress Novellas) as well as numerous short fiction, poetry and creative non-fiction published in literary journals and magazines, online and in exhibitions. She co-wrote a one-act play, entitled *Us*, with Felicity Packard, and has worked in the media, in radio and print, as well as with a range of small and large cultural and arts institutions. Her latest creative work is a memoir published by *Verity La*, an online creative arts journal, entitled 'My father's body in nine drawings'. She is the Program Director of Creative Writing at RMIT University.

Keywords:

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Introduction

The university students we are teaching in our classrooms today, it is said, are part of the 'Net Generation'. These 'digital natives', characterised by being born after 1980 (Prensky 2001: 1), have grown up immersed in technology in some form; they come to the classroom savvy and literate if not in the emerging 'Web 2.0' technologies shaped around the idea of collaboration and sharing, such as blogs, wikis and social networking sites, they are high users of established technologies, such as computers, the internet and mobile phones (Kennedy et al 2007: 486).^[1]

This paper makes an argument for the inclusion of emerging technologies in the creative writing repertoire of pedagogies, in particular the social networking site Twitter. By experimenting with Twitter poetry and nanofictions (the smallest of all stories) in and outside the classroom, creative writing students can explore the potential of these economical and fluid forms. This paper explores this field of practice and the rich teaching and learning opportunities it opens for those willing to *give it a go*, citing examples from RMIT University.

Election haikus

During the federal election campaign in Australia in August this year, online social networking sites worked over time. One of these sites, Twitter, or Twitterland as it is affectionately referred to, sometimes crashed because of the extraordinary level of traffic. At the height of interest, and circulating with the 'hash tags' #rooty, #rootyq, #austvotes and #qanda – and, on the day of the election itself, #scrooty – tweets flew back and forth on Twitter, sometimes 'trending' worldwide. Some nights, particularly when *something was happening* and broadcast live on TV, you could return to your laptop after a momentary distraction to find another 600 odd tweets waiting to be downloaded. It was impossible to keep up; you could never hope to read all of them: *now you see it, now you don't*.

This is the nature of Twitter: a site of instant messaging that began in 2006. Today it is said to have more than 100 million users worldwide^[2]. It is a fast-paced, interactive, public medium that is activated through the Twitter website using a laptop or handheld smartphones^[3]. By utilising 'hash tags' as a way of indexing content through 'search' and 'find' functions (by using the prefix # symbol), users can 'follow' different lines of interest. It is a way of aggregating content, a means of participating in selected virtual conversations.

For the founders of the medium, the definition of the word *twitter* as 'a short burst of inconsequential information' and 'chirps from birds' was a perfect choice; they wanted to capture in the name the 'physical sensation that you're buzzing your friend's pocket ... The whole bird thing: bird chirps sound meaningless to us, but meaning is applied by other birds' (Sarno 2009: 3). What this means in practice is that a Twitter page can fill very quickly covering topics such as the breakfast cereal a user might have had that morning to an interesting link, or election comment, as experienced recently. Most tweets are subsumed into Twitter and will never be read more than once, but those that are sent to many followers, that are picked up because

they're funny, pithy and to the point, can be 'retweeted' ('RT-ed'). In the election 'twitter-chatter' some tweets were retweeted up to 100 times or more (listed as 100+). In Twitter, a retweet becomes a badge of honour. Retweeting 'atomises' the content so that messages can circulate exponentially^[4]. In its coverage of the election, *The Age* newspaper republished tweets of the week and the day – in their view, the best of the best – such as: 'This election reminds me of the Doctor Who episode in which all five Doctors are present at the same time' tweeted by Jonathan Stevens, and 'Stood in a line for a long time to vote but didn't see any queue jumpers', the election day tweet of the day by Judy Horacek^[5]. These tweets were off the cuff, sometimes cheesy, often profound and mostly very funny.

Annabel Crabb, ABC Online Chief Political Reporter was one of the leaders of the pack when it came to election coverage on Twitter. She has over 20,000 followers. Early on in the campaign she set a challenge to her 'Tweet-sters' to come up with election haikus. Her challenge became a lesson in writing and poetic forms: 'Today's haiku topic: "Real Action". You know the drill – five / seven / five. "Real" is ONE SYLLABLE #electionhaiku'^[6].

Online users have demonstrated a love of the form. If you search with the hash tag #haiku you will find there are thousands of haikus on Twitter, in a multitude of languages. For example, from @ericcoliu: 'mother and I/ stand on Pacific coasts --/ the same bright moon #haiku #poetry #micropoetry', and from @stevenkane #haiku: 'In my dream, my dead-- Dad said, That's not me in your-- Mirror, that is you' (accessed 27/8/10).

140 character tweets – poetry as food

A tweet cannot be more than 140 characters long^[7]. In Twitter everything counts: characters and 'non-characters', letters, punctuation, the space between punctuation, even whether or not to use fullstops.

When composing a message or text on a phone, the character count in the top right hand side will do the counting for you. On a Twitter account, the 'what's happening' box at the top of your account starts counting down in grey numbers from 140. When you get to no more than 20 characters left, it changes to black, and then as you go past the 140 mark it starts counting up the scale, in red. It is a way to hone writing skills. You become more economical, ready to play around with possibilities, aware of definite and indefinite articles, willing to rewrite to find better ways to put things, and *experimental* with synonyms – or should that be *exploratory*, to use a word with one less character? In other words, in spite of yourself, you become sensitive to style and expression in order to get the most out of the limitations of the form and communicate effectively. Like most good writing, you make every word count; in this case, you make every character count. In essence, you become more poetic.

The kind of tweets I am talking about here are those that are compressed, feisty and extremely fluid – exactly the set of skills we are teaching our writing students in the classroom. It is surprising how, in the small space of 140 characters, you can convey so much:

I wouldn't trade my sadness, for one whole week in Los Angeles, I'd rather stumble my way, into conversation with you, (Rooke 2010: 32)

Sometimes I've already started pacing before you've even answered the phone. (Ward 2010: 97)

heavy rain turning wattle into soup (Hind 2010: 15)

moonlight cinema under blanket he finds my wet plot (Leber 2010: 96)

[microchavacter-2:] viEw[W!] Lacement. [p]Lacement wakes from a s[d(L)]o[LI]iLED aeS[yn]thetic_scape. sHe bleeds_heat_like_So[A]rr(as)ow[s]. (@netwurker 2010: 108)

(Suggestion: with this final tweet, read it really very slowly, sounding out the alternative iterations – *she bleeds, he bleeds heat like sorrow arrows.*)

Here, published on this page, these tiny poems—‘little breaths and heartbeats’ (Cole 2010: 2)—give pause, rustle and charm. When published on Twitter, because of the nature of the sharing, they come and go and you have to catch them when and how you can, but given their punch and energy, hopefully the good ones will stay with you for a long time like a sweet aftertaste. They will stick around in your synapses and in your imagination. And what a challenge for writers it is, to be *that good* that you leave a quick sweetness on a reader's tongue. Enough to become a physical exchange: poetry as food.

John Gardner, American writer and teacher of creative writing, argues that it is the physical that pulls us into story, ‘makes us believe or forget not to believe or accept the lie even as we laugh at it’ (1991: 31); that good fiction has much in common with dreams, dreams ‘that engage us heart and soul’. How this works, he argues, is that the words create a dream in the reader's mind that is ‘vivid and continuous’. Online, in the virtual ‘flow-through’ environment (and when there is no atomising of the poems by retweeting) these tweets become runaway fictions, now-you-see-it-now-you-don't poetry. In its purist sense, tweets are *vivid and continuous* writing: spontaneous improvisations, performative in nature. What we grasp of this experience is perhaps something akin to Maurice Blanchot's ‘image’ in *The Space of Literature*: ‘We see, then we imagine. After the object [the tweet in this case] comes the image’. The experience of reading text *as object* is ‘present in its absence, graspable because ungraspable, appearing as disappeared’ (1989: 255–256).

Technology into the classroom

There are all sorts of debates about the degree to which technologies could and should be part of the classroom and the teaching and learning environment in tertiary education^[8]. How often are we told as educators that we need to become more adaptable, we need to explore alternative ‘flexible delivery modes’ of teaching, ‘go online’ in our courses and capitalise on the potential of ‘learning management systems’ such as Blackboard or Moodle, or draw on the plethora of online resources available through YouTube, blogs and Flickr.

A study of American undergraduate students instigated by the Educause Centre for Applied Research found that in 2007 virtually all of the students who were part of the

study owned a mobile phone (the Educause Centre surveyed more than 25,000 students at over 100 colleges and universities in a longitudinal study conducted over seven years) (Salway and Caruso 2007: 2) ^[9]. Two years later, in 2009, in that same longitudinal study, it was observed that ‘like the clothes in their suitcases, the technologies students bring to campus change every year’ (Smith et al 2009: 1). It was noted that with these technological changes come a great swathe of social and cultural changes too, such as, the capacity for recording everything we do on the digital cameras in our phones, listening to gigabytes of downloaded songs, and securing ‘15 megabytes of fame’ on YouTube and Facebook. The study argues that this ‘same force of change’ means that students’ written language is changing too, adapting to ‘the technology of text messages and 140-character “tweets”’ (Smith et al 2009: 1).

In Australia, an ongoing study (from 2006) across three universities investigating the use of emerging technology based tools in teaching and learning, also reported ‘high use of mobile phones for calling and texting’ suggesting these ‘older’ technologies have become ‘ubiquitous’ (Kennedy et al 2008: 489). In terms of ‘new’ technologies it found that many first year students are ‘relatively unfamiliar with a range of emerging technologies and tools’ (Kennedy et al 2008: 490). This study surveyed 108 university staff and 2588 first year students (Kennedy et al 2008: 485).

One outcome of this Australian study is a NetGen toolkit for educators interested in incorporating Web 2.0 technologies into their teaching (Gray et al 2009). Many educators are investigating and trialling different ways to do this in the classroom. Some suggest smartphones are good for researching topics and finding quick answers to questions raised in the classroom, looking up reference material both in image and text, recording and listening to podcasts, engaging in virtual conversations (Rampell 2008; Carter 2009; Cox 2010). In the Australian study, a suggested future direction is for academics to provide learning activities ‘that model sophisticated “real-life” uses of emerging technologies’ that relate to disciplinary and interdisciplinary communities of practice’ (Kennedy et al 2008: 490). And at least in regard to one central aspect, for American students, it is argued, those championing technology in the classroom are ‘on to something: most students (60.9 percent) believe it improves their learning’ (Guess 2007: 1). Mind you, it is not the be-all and end-all. In the 2009 Educause survey it was found, consistently, that students wanted the use of technology to be balanced with ‘the human touch’ (Smith et al 2009: 12). In other words, teachers matter; students want to experience face-to-face learning, they need human interaction in the classroom.

So – what does this mean for the creative writing classroom?

Writing students writing tweets

At RMIT University, new pedagogies are being explored in a number of ways.

The research group Transmesh, exploring the creation of a new city of literature space through geo coordinates, is dedicated to the creation of a series of interactive social network applications using mobile technologies in conjunction with the Melbourne Writers Festival. In 2009, one of the projects that came out of these GPS (global

positioning system) capabilities was the delivery of curated poetry via Twitter and the RMIT Bluetooth server as part of Mobile Textualism^[10]. In 2010, this project was extended and launched as Poetry 4 U^[11]. These Twitter ‘competitions’ were open to anyone, encouraging public engagement with poetry embedded in surprising places on the streets of Melbourne^[12].

The best entries, selected by a panel of writers and academics, were tweeted on the twitter.com/RMIT_Poetry site during the Melbourne Writers Festivals (this year #poetry4u attracted over 900 followers). In 2010 poems also appeared on the LED ticker tape screens at Federation Square during lunchtime each day, and they were stuck up as posters on billboard newsstand cylinders down Swanston Street. As well, the public was invited to submit their mobile poems during the festival – live and uncensored – to extend the interactivity of the exhibition by contributing to the ‘vivid and continuous’ conversation *on the fly*. To do this, they simply added the hash tag #poetry4u to any of their poems they published on Twitter. The curated collection is now published in a printed anthology (Rendle-Short et al 2010).

As part of this research and as a way of introducing creative writing students in the new undergraduate creative writing program at RMIT to experiment with form, and to encourage those who were interested to submit work to the exhibition, I explored ways of bringing Twitter into the classroom, specifically the challenge of writing short, pithy 140 character poems and nanofictions as an exercise in composition.

Students were asked to write tweets any way they liked, to edit them in pairs, and then to present the best to the class. In order to explore the limits and possibilities of this exercise I suggested the students compose their tweets *in situ* on their phones, if they had them with them. Many did, of course, although interestingly, not all my writing students actually own phones. For those who do own phones, they thoroughly enjoyed *turning them on* in the classroom. Some said it was subversive; all agreed it gave the writing ‘realness’. So, fingers at the ready, in position, and with the character counter assisting in terms of length, students forged ahead and wrote. They then sent each other their tweets to share and edit (they were only able to do this if they had enough credit on their phones!) and ‘tweeted’ back responses. This ‘send-a-message-to-edit’ aspect of the writing process proved to be the favourite part of the exercise. Some of the work that came from these classes did in fact end up in the exhibition, for example:

*Today I watched two girls breathe on cold glass.
The first girl wrote ‘I love you’ in the steam.
The other drew a face.* (Owen 2010: 13)

To entertain the mobile phone in the classroom opens up other sorts of complications. One student took a call from his mother who rang the minute he turned his phone on; he had to explain that he was ‘in class’, writing, on his mobile. For another student, the sharing of tweets and the send-to-edit exchange took on even funnier proportions when, on receiving her poem from her pair she received instead, at exactly the same time, a text from her boyfriend: ‘we’re moving to a new modality where the sky’s the limit’ (Cox 2010: 5). She thought her boyfriend’s text was the 140-character text from her writing partner – it could have been a poem, she said, it sounded pretty right.

After much laughter, it gave us a spontaneous opportunity for discussing the differences between 'ordinary' tweets and these poetic, nanofiction varieties: what it is that makes writing a dream; or as John Gardner would say, writing to *engage the heart and soul*.

Tweeting outside the classroom

As an extension to the Poetry 4 U experiments, RMIT creative writing students have participated in other Twitter-fests outside the classroom.

In conjunction with STREAT (www.streat.com.au), a social enterprise providing homeless young people with a supported pathway to long-term careers in the hospitality industry, writing students partnered with STREAT's trainees to explore and experience Melbourne's CBD. The pairs 'texted' stories about their experience of the street, importantly, as they experienced the street together. The idea behind this project was to collect an organic, creative set of anonymous microstories based on shared experiences. RMIT students provided their phones and STREAT provided lunch at STREAT's food cart in Federation Square. By embracing new technologies as a way of expressing 'a sense of place', mobile phones in hand, both groups took to the challenge with great enthusiasm, writing the streets of the city, together 'mapping' Melbourne. It was a fair exchange: trainees showed students their favourite haunts and vice versa. The form itself – writing 140 character messages – had an edge of excitement about it, especially the tweets from those phones where they could be pinpointed with a GPS co-ordinate, down the many tiny laneways. The project entitled 'Walk a Mile in My Shoes' was a way of capturing an array of experiences from the street, a method of communicating heartfelt, highly charged realities in an immediate, raw and uncensored way:

*Free shaving gel given on a street corner. But now i have to carry it all day
We loved that alley, you and i. We wrapped in night and gin, the whole first year a
blur.
And when I can afford it the 7/11 is my fluorscent [sic] heaven.
I ruffle the dirty change and buy a sweet tooth pink doughnut.
(www.streat.com.au/blog/walk-mile-my-shoes (accessed 27/8/10))*

Afterwards, the creative writing students told me that they will never 'walk the streets of Melbourne' in the same way again.

Since then, and as a further expression of writing and publishing activity in keeping with these teacher-led excursions, RMIT creative writing students have developed their own online site for 'nanofiction and micropoetry', a website as a site of writing practice. 'Ex Calamus' (<http://excalamus.com/> (accessed 27/8/10)) is a gallery space dedicated to 'poetry and fiction whose breadth far exceeds its length', and is part of their challenge to write – 'out of the pen'. These students have set the bar high by writing themselves into the landscape of the City of Literature in figurative and literal ways. Here, a nanofiction by Eliza Fisher:

*Smother your body in blanket,
Oxygen vacuum, they're coming.*

*If you don't have skin,
You're not there.* (Fisher 2010: 3)

As Virginia Trioli says of this 'so-called Twitterverse': 'The good stuff out there is just great and is a dynamic, breathing example of just what the MIT boffins had in mind when they came up with the world wide web' (2010: 1). For writing programs it is a way of building an active writing community, inside and outside the classroom, a positive environment of learning, practice and publication. *Breathe on.*

Endnotes

1. The term Web 2.0 was first coined in October 2004 (O'Reilly 2005: 1). Simply put, it refers to a group of internet 'second generation' technologies with an emphasis on interactivity.
2. <http://economictimes.indiatimes.com/infotech/internet/Twitter-snags-over-100-million-users-eyes-money-making/articleshows/5808927.cms> (accessed 27/8/10).
3. By default all tweets are publicly visible, but users can lock their accounts so that only their friends see their messages.
4. 'Atomising' content is an expression noted by journalist and academic Julie Posetti: the Twitter audience is 'more than the sum of the followings of individual tweeters' (2009: 7).
5. <http://twitter.com/jons68/status/2041386774>, *The Sunday Age*, 8/8/10, p. 9; @horacek, *The Sunday Age*, 22/8/10, p. 3. I have to thank Judy Horacek for introducing me to the working practice of 'tweeting'.
6. Annabel Crabb, 7.20pm 3/8/10 via web (accessed 27/8/10).
7. As a co-founder of Twitter, Jack Dorsey, states: 'most basic phones are limited to 160 characters before they split the messages. So in order to minimize the hassle and thinking around receiving a message, we wanted to make sure that we were not splitting any messages. So we took 20 characters for the user name, and left 140 for the content. That's where it all came from' (Sarno 2009: 2).
8. A quick search on university sites points to references assisting academics in these debates about mobile technologies and new pedagogies. See <http://trs.unimelb.edu.au/news/>; <http://ro.uow.edu.au/newtech/>; <http://www.latrobe.edu.au/teaching/teaching-resources/flex-learning/references.html> (accessed 27/8/10).
9. EDUCAUSE Center for Applied Research is a nonprofit group whose mission is to advance the intelligent use of technology in higher education (www.educause.edu/ (accessed 27/8/10)).
10. Melbourne Writers Festival, August 21–30, 2009.
11. Melbourne Writers Festival, August 27 – September 5, 2010.
12. Poetry 4 U received nearly 500 entries.

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