Ross Watkins

Uncertain Duality: Conflicts of the Creative Writing Undergraduate as Scholar/Author

Abstract:

Given that it is now over a decade since Evans and Deller-Evans (TEXT, Vol 2 No 2 October 1998) conducted their study into student expectations and experiences of Creative Writing in academia, and in response to the progressive enrolment surge in the University of the Sunshine Coast's Creative Writing program, in 2008 USC sought to investigate the nature of the Creative Writing undergraduate as scholar/author, and the particular conflicts peculiar to this uncertain duality.

This paper presents findings of the 2008 USC study which are relevant to the teaching and learning of Creative Writing across the tertiary sector. In particular, the paper will focus on: student views of the critical deconstruction of narrative models in the creation of students' own narratives (the reading/writing nexus); the tension between student expectations of tutor feedback and criteria based assessment; and student perceptions of their creative 'difference' within the academic context. From this, the paper aims to contribute to the discussion surrounding the motivations of students enrolling in Creative Writing courses for scholarly and/or potential publishing career reasons. In conclusion, the paper intends to put forward the pedagogical implications of student enrolment motivations in relation to the findings of the 2008 USC study.

Biographical Note:

Ross Watkins is a Course Coordinator in Creative Writing at the University of the Sunshine Coast. His short fiction and non-fiction has appeared in six national and international anthologies, and showcased at the 2006 Byron Bay Writers' Festival and 2002 Sydney Writers' Festival. Ross is a First Class Honours graduate of the UTS writing program and is currently pursuing his Doctorate of Creative Arts (Creative Writing) at USC.

INTRODUCTION

'But…' Amanda strained forward in her chair. 'But I thought I was going to come in here and you were going to tell me that this will be published.'

I looked at the criteria sheet on which I had critiqued her formative draft: *This narrative concept has great potential, Amanda, however that potential has not been fully realised due to…* Criterion such as *Quality of Narrative Voice* suggested where her use of narrative elements fell short of the expectations established through the study of narrative exemplars.

Amanda adjusted her glasses. 'I didn't expect this,' she said. 'This isn't what I expected at all.'

I leaned back. Breathed. And so I began.

What are the pedagogical implications of such misconceptions of the position of Creative Writing teachers within the academic context? What are student expectations of feedback and how does this relate to their motivations for pursuing Creative Writing as a course of study? Do students share the discipline's view of the importance of deconstructing prescribed readings as models for the construction of their own narratives? And what is the nature and extent of the discrepancy between tutor and student beliefs on achievement?

Amanda's comments are highly problematic due to their apparent disregard for the 'discipline' – as Dawson (2008) defines: 'a body of knowledge and a set of educational techniques for imparting this knowledge' – of Creative Writing within the academic context. The assumption that her tutor would somehow authorize the publication of her formative draft or that, in the least, criteria based assessment would in some way provide a direct path to the publication of her narrative appears to be an alarming confirmation of McFarlane's claim of a 'cult of authorship' (Krauth and Webb 2007) in Australian Creative Writing courses, and the simultaneous lack of comprehension of Creative Writing's – as a discipline – complicity in the 'paradigm of scholarship' (Woods 2008). However, to what extent is Amanda's approach shared amongst her fellow students? Is there a dual student approach to the station and function of Creative Writing in academia, a reflection on the discipline's own sense of duality? And if so, what are the inherent conflicts in the duality of the student as scholar/author?

In eleven years, enrolments in Creative Writing courses at the University of the Sunshine Coast have burgeoned from approximately 20 (1997 inception) to 470 (Semester 1, 2008) across six courses on offer per semester (nine per year). In order to investigate the reasons behind such enrolment growth and, more importantly, to gain a better understanding of the Creative Writing student duality for the improvement of learning and teaching practices, a research survey was implemented in May 2008.

This paper explores the implications of a selection of the student survey results, as pertaining to the paper's research enquiry into the conflicts of the Creative Writing student as scholar/author. By providing relevant survey data and highlighting their germane outcomes, this paper hopes to contribute qualitative and quantitative significance to the discussion surrounding the motivations for students enrolling in Creative Writing courses, and the effect this duality has on course delivery.

SURVEY METHODOLOGY

The University of the Sunshine Coast (USC) 2008 Creative Writing Student Survey (Chief Investigator: Associate Professor Dr Gary Crew; Associate Investigators: Dr Peter Innes and Mr Ross Watkins; Ethics Approval: A/07/124) was conducted in-class during May 2008. Although enrolment figures across the four courses on offer during Semester 1, 2008 were approximately 470, the actual number of survey respondents was 167. This participation rate is in part due to absence, but more significantly relates to individual students' simultaneous enrolment in multiple Creative Writing courses (generally up to three of the four available per semester). In saying this, the 167 responses were widely diverse and substantive, thus creating valid research findings.

The survey instrument comprised of 101 questions, answered anonymously and divided into the following partitions of enquiry:
>   A: Writing motivations and perceptions of achievement
>   B: Writing aspirations and course facilitation
>   C: Personal writing practices and processes
>   D: Reading preferences and course delivery
>   E: Perceptions/views/expectations of Creative Writing within an academic context
>   F: Student profile

The questions utilised a combination of subjective (open-ended questions) and objective (fixed choice questions) approaches in order to create a range of responses which could be validated via cross-referencing where applicable.

Several methods were used to triangulate and thereby increase validity and reliability of the results, including: open coding (see Glaser & Strauss 2006; Strauss & Corbin 1998) of written student survey feedback; quantitative closed coded data analysis; and quantitative content analysis (using SPSS Text Analysis based on Princeton University's WordNet – see Fellbaum 1998) of the feedback to validate, extend and explore the emerging qualitative themes. These methods were employed to provide emerging models of sense of self, motivation, difference, and perceptions of achievement of Creative Writing undergraduates at the University of the Sunshine Coast.

As mentioned above, this paper has utilised a selection of the results in order to investigate the conflicts of the Creative Writing undergraduate as scholar/author.

ESTABLISHING 'DUALITY'

It is not this paper's intention to polarise Creative Writing students' perceptions of self as either 'scholar' or 'potential published author'. Rather, through the exploration of the following survey findings I intend to highlight some of the inherent tensions students experience as a result of the discipline's own apparent 'duality'. By this, I am referring to Creative Writing's institutional responsibility to produce 'Research' and Higher Degree by Research graduands for funding purposes and hence legitimacy, whilst utilising commercially published and most often highly commercially successful texts as our primary exemplars; exemplars which form the very basis of the reading/writing nexus as learning and teaching models for critical analysis and deconstruction within the classroom. Of course, these texts are the naturally occurring exemplars for 'success' when considering commercial publication as the assumed end for the act of writing creatively: reaching an audience which can foster the further creation of works. However, this is not the institutionally-sanctioned end for Creative Writing within academia.

Without this broader view of their chosen field of study, how do students negotiate this 'duality'? Does the discipline's duality in turn create a dualism for the student: a student conflicted by the divergent forces of pursuing Creative Writing as either the linking of 'imagination, rhetorical practice, and literacy' (Woods 2008) – as a wholly educational endeavour – or as an unequivocal pathway to publication? Am I partly responsible for Amanda's deeply concerning misconception of my role in her course of study? And what is the nature of her uncertainty?

SURVEY FINDINGS

1. Motivations

In their April 2007 *TEXT* Editorial, Krauth and Webb state: 'Students don't enrol in large numbers in order to become best-selling authors any more. They enrol to learn about writing'. Student motivations for choosing Creative Writing as a course of study – as a major, minor or elective – is central in substantiating any claim to the duality of the Creative Writing student as scholar/author.

In asking students to provide the primary reasons for enrolling in Creative Writing courses at USC, the following results were produced (see Figure 1).

Figure 1: Student motivations for enrolling in Creative Writing

The two dominant motivations for enrolment are:
- 'to express myself' (42 respondents = 25%)
- 'to get a degree' (36 respondents = 22%)

By contrast, only 7 (4%) of the 167 respondents indicated 'publication' as their primary motivation for enrolling.

Furthermore, linkage of shared responses (as indicated by the colour and weight of the intersecting lines) indicates a correlation between students enrolling for degree attainment purposes but choosing Creative Writing as a means of 'escape', 'enjoyment' (indicated as 'like') and personal 'expression'.

The synthesis of this information clearly supports Krauth and Webb's aforementioned assertion that students' primary motivations for enrolling in Creative Writing courses are not publishing driven, but rather that Creative Writing courses offer students a platform for expression which other university courses do not. It is apparent that this is highly valued.

However, when students were asked to indicate whether publishing was viewed 'as a desirable potential outcome of studying creative writing', (as opposed to a 'motivation for enrolment') the responses produced a contradictory picture (see Table 1). What sense can be made of this disparity? What would compel 65 (39%) respondents to assert publication as a motivating or contributing factor for their enrolment decisions?

The answer to this may be in Venero Armanno's comment (Krauth and Webb 2007) that the publication of students' writing is viewed as a 'by-product' of participation within Creative Writing courses. However, what Armanno's comment does not impress is the prevalence of this belief amongst students, as is overtly demonstrated in the Table 1 statistics.

Perhaps what is even more relevant to Creative Writing course delivery is that more than 60% of students indicated that publication is not considered to be of importance.

Table 1: Desire to publish as potential outcome of enrolling in Creative Writing courses

	Respondents	Percentage
No	102	61.1
Yes	65	38.9
Total	167	100.0

2. The Reading/Writing Nexus

Much has been written about the reading/writing nexus and the nature of 'criticism' in relation to the creative process and its role within the classroom – reading 'as a writer' (Freiman 2005) – as well as the shifting terms of student engagement with reading materials due to technology-abetted shifting forms of literacy (or 'electracy' – Ulmer in Woods 2008), and the transitional shock students encounter upon discovering tertiary requisites for critical reading approaches (Skrebels in Woods 2008).

However, the continuing relevance of active forms of reading in the process of creative production is upheld as fundamental in the exploration of written language as a form of communication. Such views are clearly maintained by the emphasis on 'significant' texts as exemplars for the teaching and learning of core narrative elements and considerations of narrative forms, aesthetics and poetics; essentially, language in action. As discussed earlier, 'successful' commercial publications form the basis of such prescribed reading lists and therefore must establish a value system or hierarchy of expectations for 'achievement' which students are presumed to adhere to in order to build their own creative 'successes'.

Table 2 exemplifies that a majority (64%) of students have broad level agreement with the use of prescribed readings as models for Creative Writing, while 20% expressed broad level disagreement. This data is not particularly revolutionary. However, of greater

significance is the outcome of cross-tabling Table 2 ('views on prescribed readings') with Table 1 ('publication as potential outcome'), as shown in Table 3. While there remains broad level agreement with the use of prescribed readings as exemplars regardless of approaches to publishing outcomes (64% of 'No' respondents agreed, while 63% of 'Yes' respondents agreed), significance rests in the statistic that students who indicated publishing as a desirable outcome of studying Creative Writing are twice as likely to 'strongly agree' (28% cf. 14%) with the use of prescribed readings as models for 'success'. Does this reveal that students who may construct themselves as 'authors' are more willing to accept the learning system imposed on them? Alternatively, does this signify that students who do not construct themselves as 'authors' – and perhaps therefore by default as 'scholars' of academia – are less willing to consent to the learning structures in place?

A closer look at Creative Writing students' perceptions of 'difference' may extend the implications of such lines of enquiry.

Table 2: Perceptions of prescribed readings as models for Creative Writing

	Respondents	Percentage
SD	5	3.0
D	29	17.4
U	27	16.1
A	74	44.3
SA	32	19.2
Total	167	100.0

SD = Strongly Disagree; D = Disagree; U = Unsure; A = Agree; SA = Strongly Agree

Table 3: Publishing goals/reading nexus

Publishing goal	I learn how to write better by using readings as models					
	SD	**D**	**U**	**A**	**SA**	**Total**
No	4	16	17	51	14	102
	3.9	15.7	16.7	50.0	13.7	100.0
Yes	1	13	10	23	18	65
	1.5	20.0	15.4	35.4	27.7	100.0
Total	5	29	27	74	32	167
	3.0	17.3	16.2	44.3	19.2	100.0

SD = Strongly Disagree; D = Disagree; U = Unsure; A = Agree; SA = Strongly Agree

3. Perceptions of Difference

In the design and implementation processes of the research survey, we (as investigators) had great interest in whether Creative Writing students considered themselves in some way 'different' to non-Creative Writing students. At the core of this interest is the

concept that: firstly, Creative Writing may be considered 'other' within the university context due to its perverse popularity as a course of study (as reflected by increases in enrolment figures across the sector over the past decade – although such trends presently appear to be idle or indeed in decline, particularly within regional institutions, paralleling the general movement away from tertiary education in favour of more immediate vocational options for school leavers) despite, as Taylor points out: 'the absence of any employment niche' (1999); and secondly, that Creative Writing students construct themselves as 'other' – as 'author'? – due to the platform for 'expression' the discipline offers.

Table 4 demonstrates that such a culture of 'difference' does exist amongst 60% of students (90 of 150 respondents). When cross-tabling Table 4 with Table 1 ('publication as potential outcome'), as shown in Table 5, this perception of 'difference' is further increased amongst those students who view publication as a desirable and viable outcome of course participation. Specifically, these 'publication orientated' students are almost three times more likely (73% cf. 27%) to consider themselves as 'different' to non-Creative Writing students. This is significant when considering approaches to course delivery and assessment structures, and how these students negotiate their way through the university system which regards them as 'students' in a more traditionally 'scholarly' manner, not as emergent 'authors'.

Table 4: Student perceptions of 'difference' to non-Creative Writing students

	Respondents	Percentage
Am	90	60.0
Am Not	60	40.0
Total	150	100.0
No Response	17	
Total	167	

Table 5: Publishing goals/perceptions of 'difference' nexus

	I am 'different' to other students		
Publishing goal	**Am**	**Am Not**	**Total**
No	47	44	91
	51.6	48.4	100.0
Yes	43	16	59
	72.9	27.1	100.0
Total	90	60	150
	60.0	40.0	100.0

(Chi = 6.724; df = 1; p = 0.010)

Remarkably, the qualitative responses students provided with respect to Table 4 were divided in the following ways:
- – 100% of respondents who did not perceive 'difference' claimed (relatively) that 'all students study'; while
- – respondents who did perceive 'difference' provided a range of reasons, signifying the creative nature of the subject, the necessity and use of imagination, a greater sense of individuality, flexibility, subjectivity, enjoyment, age discrepancies, and the focus on 'entertaining' reading materials.
- – Isolated responses provided perhaps the most insightful reasons for perceiving 'difference', including: 'not a traditional course'; 'no career outcome'; and (certainly the most perturbing response) 'I am looked down upon' (presumably by non-Creative Writing students, and presumably for the very reasons why students are motivated to enrol in Creative Writing courses, i.e. as an opportunity for significant creative 'expression' rarely afforded by 'traditional' subject areas).

The above information may be interpreted as an indicator of how students position themselves as 'scholar' or 'scholar/author'; a factor which undoubtedly impacts on their participation within our courses (from views of prescribed reading models, to approaches to assessment, and expectations of feedback). If such a dichotomous split was upheld, then two constructions of self could be construed: that perception of 'difference' positions the student within a 'guard' view (where the individual is central within the context, looking out); or that no perception of 'difference' positions the student within the 'yard' view (where the context is central to the individual's experience). Such divergence must be considered in the construction and delivery of Creative Writing programs.

4. Perceptions of Achievement and the Implications for Feedback

When we approach student works for assessment purposes, as Freiman (2005) points out: 'we operate within the split between reading and criticism when we apply 'criticism' (what kind of criticism?) to their writing, especially because we cannot escape our own discourses and particular critical positions, whatever they may be (even as we change them)'. The subjectivity of language is known. In fact, in Creative Writing such subjectivities may be viewed not as limitations but as potential openings for the construction of perpetual meaning-making. This, however, seems anathema to expectations of assessment processes to be essentially objective.

Student expectations of tutor feedback cannot be severed from a student's primary reasons for enrolling. Returning briefly to the responses captured in Figure 1 ('motivations for enrolment'), the three responses of significance for the purposes of this paper were: 'to express myself' (42 respondents = 25%); 'to get a degree' (36 respondents = 22%); and 'to be published' (7 respondents = 4%). It is apparent that these divergent motivations may be interpreted in the following ways (respectively): as a process of meaning-making; as a means to an end; and as a means *and* an end. From a

student's perspective, it is their teacher's role as the learned educator (subjectivities included) to facilitate the fulfilment of those motivations, and feedback forms a pivotal part in this process. As Potter and Lynch (unpublished refereed paper) explain (citing Juwah et al.):

> 'good feedback practice: facilitates the development of self-awareness (reflection) in learning, encourages teacher and peer dialogue around learning, helps clarify what is good performance (goals, criteria, standards expected), provides opportunities to close the gap between current and desired performance, delivers high quality information to students about their learning, encourages positive motivational beliefs and self-esteem and provides information to teachers that can be used to help shape the teaching'.

Of course, the above is drawing attention to what 'good feedback' should endeavour to provide, however often does not, as exemplified by the anecdote featured in the Introduction of this paper, which attempts to portray the gaps that are commonly encountered between teachers and students during the feedback process: 'But I thought I was going to come in here and you were going to tell me that this will be published.'

By comparing Table 6 ('student understanding of tutor beliefs on achievement/non-achievement') with Table 7 ('student personal beliefs on achievement/non-achievement'), the most notable data is within the proportions of students who chose not to respond to the question at all: Table 6 = 55 of 167 participants (33%); Table 7 = 14 of 167 participants (8%). The implication of these results is that precisely one third of students were not aware of why or if they were 'achieving' in an academic sense (from the tutor's perspective). In contrast only 8% of students did not express a personal understanding of their own sense of 'achievement' within Creative Writing.

Table 6: Understanding of tutors beliefs on achievement/non-achievement

	Respondents	Percentage
Do	92	82.1
Do Not	20	17.9
Total	112	100.0
No Response	55	
Total	167	

Table 7: Student personal beliefs on achievement/non-achievement

	Respondents	Percentage
Do	115	75.2
Do Not	38	24.8
Total	153	100.0
No Response	14	
Total	167	

The qualitative responses to the questions which produced Tables 6 and 7 extend the understanding of those results, as exemplified by the response webs of Figures 2 and 3.

The following results were observed in Figure 2:

'Student understanding of tutor beliefs on achievement':
- 57 respondents (51%) signified 'I fulfil criteria' as the basis for 'achievement'
- 18 respondents (16%) signified 'good ideas' as the basis for 'achievement'
- 14 respondents (12%) signified 'I try hard' as the basis for 'achievement'
- 6 respondents (5%) signified 'good teaching' as the basis for 'achievement'

'Student understanding of tutor beliefs on non-achievement':
- 17 respondents (15%) signified 'no feedback' as the basis for 'non-achievement'

The following results were observed in Figure 3:

'Student personal beliefs on achievement':
- 26 respondents (17%) signified 'I try hard' as the basis for 'achievement'
- 18 respondents (12%) signified 'fulfil criteria' as the basis for 'achievement'
- 16 respondents (10%) signified 'good ideas' as the basis for 'achievement'
- 16 respondents (10%) signified 'passion for craft' as the basis for 'achievement'
- 10 respondents (7%) signified 'good teaching' as the basis for 'achievement'
- 8 respondents (5%) signified 'respond to feedback/good feedback' as the basis for 'achievement'

'Student personal beliefs on non-achievement':
- 11 respondents (7%) signified 'no confidence' as the basis for 'non-achievement'
- 10 respondents (7%) signified 'no time' as the basis for 'non-achievement'
- 9 respondents (6%) signified 'no feedback' as the basis for 'non-achievement'
- 8 respondents (5%) signified 'do not fulfil criteria' as the basis for 'non-achievement'

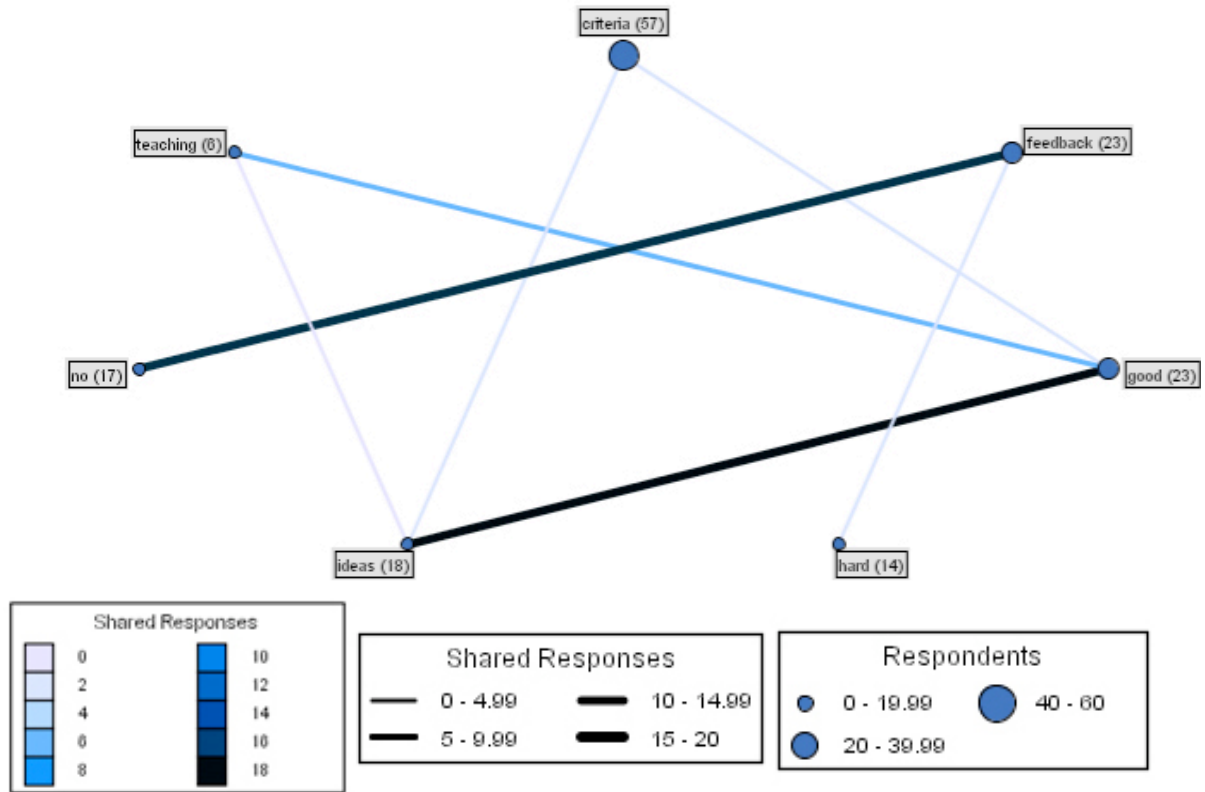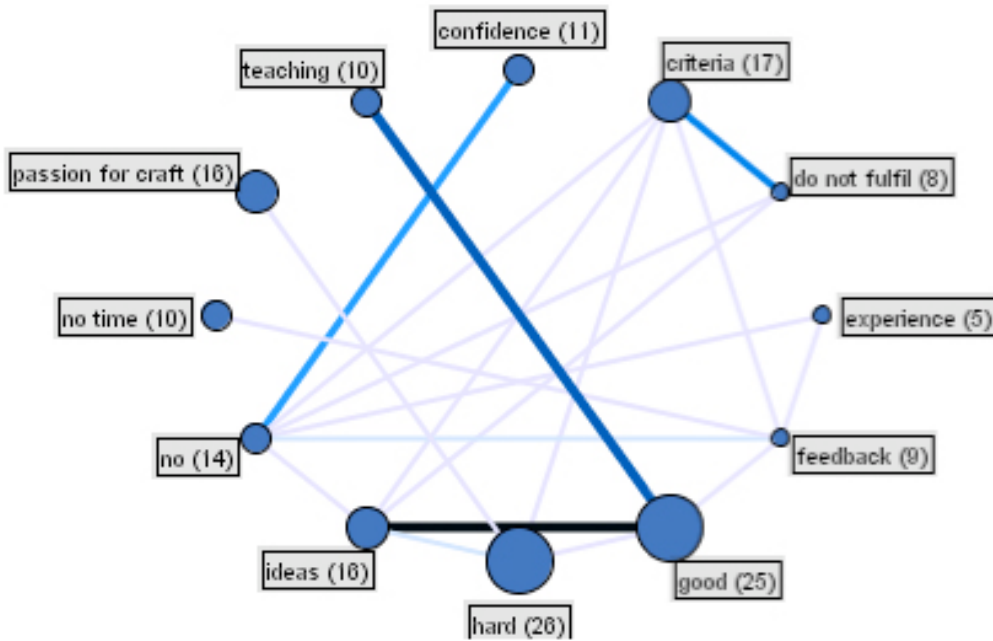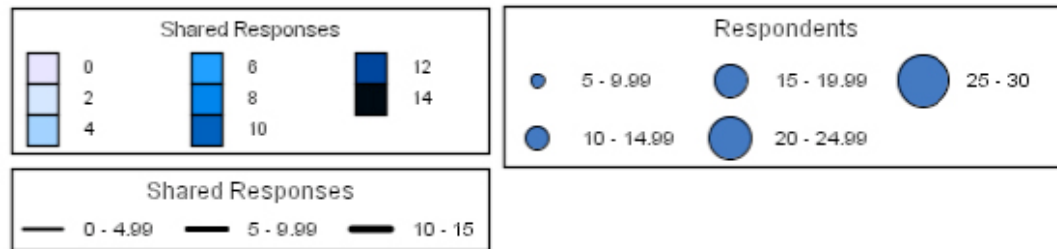**Figure 2:** Understanding of tutors beliefs on achievement/non-achievement

Figure 3: Student personal beliefs on achievement/non-achievement

Shared Responses					
0		6		12	
2		8		14	
4		10			

Respondents					
5 - 9.99		15 - 19.99		25 - 30	
10 - 14.99		20 - 24.99			

Shared Responses		
0 - 4.99	5 - 9.99	10 - 15

Much can be made of the above results. However, the quantitative information which cannot be overlooked is that while 56% of respondents signified pedagogically-related factors ('good teaching', 'fulfils criteria', etc.) as the basis for their tutors' concept of student 'achievement', only 24% of respondents made the same connection to their personal concepts of 'achievement'. Is this the synapse exemplified by Amanda's statement that my feedback was not what she 'expected'?

Conversely, the prevalence of personally-related factors as the basis of achievement, such as: 'good ideas', 'I try hard' and 'passion for the craft', appear to reinforce this synapse by suggesting that in order to succeed in Creative Writing all one requires is a good idea and enough effort to carry out that idea. Of course, persistence and a healthy sense of innovation are undeniably advantageous when trying to 'achieve' in Creative Writing, if not in all undertakings, especially of the academic variety. However, do these personally-related factors undermine or contravene our pedagogical approach to the learning and teaching of Creative Writing? Or, alternatively, do these survey results suggest that we as Creative Writing teachers are not successfully communicating what is at the core of our discipline (as is reflected in the analysis of exemplars and the consequential criteria we impose upon student works): that the quality of the construction of a narrative is what makes it 'successful', regardless of the idea. After all, an idea is only as 'good' as its enactment.

PEDAGOGICAL IMPLICATIONS OF THE RESEARCH SURVEY
Through the presentation and analysis of relevant research findings of the University of the Sunshine Coast (USC) 2008 Creative Writing Student Survey, it is clear that both a sense of uncertainty and duality exist within both the delivery and participation of Creative Writing courses. So, what are the pedagogical implications of these findings and in what ways can we begin to better understand and bridge the synapse that students and teachers commonly encounter, especially during the influential process of tutor feedback in the aim of not only fostering 'successful' narratives but encouraging students to adopt a firmer sense of ownership of their education?

This paper presents three ways the Creative Writing discipline may approach and manage the 'scholar/author' duality:

1. Offer duality in assessment structures so that students may play a more active role in their educational pathways. Such duality may be made available by structuring a greater level of flexibility within assessment forms, eg. students possess the option of responding to prescribed texts in either a creative or critical manner. In this way, students may empower themselves and construct learning outcomes in accordance with their fundamental motivations and goals for pursuing Creative Writing at university.

2. Cultivate cross-discipline compatibility which contributes to Creative Writing majors, eg. by linking Creative Writing to literature studies or historical studies in which students have the opportunity to write in innovative creative forms in response to the pedagogies of those disciplines (eg. ficto-criticism, etc.).

3. Develop one to one tuition courses (such as Production Workshops or Independent Research Projects) in which students negotiate the nature of course content, and thus may pursue critical or creative pathways according to their individual motivations and goals. In this way, a student looking to move onto Honours or Higher Degrees by Research may build the necessary research and writing skills required for such academic pursuits; or, alternatively, students such as Amanda are able to work on a narrative of significant proportions with the intention to seek commercial publication.

In conclusion, the research survey was successful in allowing students to communicate their enrolment motivations, goals and views on established teaching and learning models in Creative Writing programs. The outcome for us is that by substantiating apparent dualities we can now actively develop more informed approaches to Creative Writing course construction and delivery with the aim of clarifying the position of Creative Writing teachers within the academic context, providing necessary flexibility to appease the divergent and conflicting natures of the scholar/author.

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