**Creative play: welcoming students into a community of practice in creative writing through a participatory action research project.**

**Abstract:**

This paper reports on an attempt to engage undergraduate students in extra-curricular writing activities in order to induct them into the tacit knowledge and understanding of a writing community. Using Etienne Wenger ‘s notion of communities of practice as a model for considering learning it argues that in order to welcome students into a community they need to be empowered so that they construct their identity as members of that subject group.

A study of the literature surrounding communities of practice, and Participatory Action Research (PAR) led to the adoption of PAR as a mode of consultation with students and as an instrument for change. Students’ views on their experience of the extra-curricular activity are presented and the subsequent progress made in revising the provision is reported, along with the extension of the consultation to include the student view on their curriculum and an attempt to accommodate some of those views in revised delivery. The paper concludes with the proposal that the use of PAR may be a useful tool in promoting autonomy amongst undergraduate students and that Creative Writing tutors may be uniquely well placed to exploit it.

**Keywords:** Community of practice, Participatory Action Research, engagement, creative writing, student voice.

**Context**

The programme under discussion is a Creative Writing programme at a large post 1992 university (this is a term in the UK for new universities created in 1992 from polytechnics which had a tradition of offering more vocationally focused tertiary education). The Creative Writing element is a joint provision. The students’ identity is therefore split between these two aspects of their learning. Being a small programme there are a limited number of voices (tutors or staff) feeding into its ongoing development.

**Introduction**

The difficulties of trying to encourage creativity in the student writer in the context of a results-driven university context are familiar. The neo-liberal drive for universities to be ‘accountable, productive and efficient’ (King Alexander 2000) to develop ‘excellence’ in teaching and to focus on ‘good awards’ as a measure of ‘output’ often seem a very long way from the notion of developing the autonomous learner which so many of our programme specifications purport to develop. The focus on measuring skills and attainment can be reductive, restrictive and above all ‘alienating’ for students. (Mann 2010) How then to encourage them to be creative in this results driven environment?

The need for creative play is widely recognised in both Creative Writing literature (Ayckbourn 2004; Greig 2005; Bown and Gawthorpe 2010) and in generic educational literature (Winnicott 1971; Knight and Yorke 2003; Sambell, McDowell, and Montgomery 2013). Students can struggle to develop their skills if they have no opportunity to experiment in a low stakes environment without fear of failure. In an attempt to address this, about four years ago I introduced an extra-curricular creative writing workshop series at my home institution with the intention of providing an opportunity for creative play. It was hoped that this would make students feel welcomed into a ‘community of practice’ (Lave and Wenger 1991) by creating opportunities for them to mix with other members of the writers’ community.

Lave and Wenger’s approach suggests that learning centres on the construction of new identities. In this model, learning is a social process in which ‘legitimate peripheral participation’ plays a crucial part. This form of learning involves initiation into tacit understandings shared by a community and not just a familiarity with core subject knowledge. If students are to become part of this community it means they should feel valued as co-contributors to it. Without this sense of belonging it becomes much harder to create a suitably relaxed atmosphere which might enable students to engage in creative play.

Routine evaluation suggested that students enjoyed and valued the sessions but a chance remark from a student who had not attended caused me to reconsider. I asked why he had not been attending and he said that it was just another class I was making him do. I had not picked up on this because I had been evaluating the sessions with those who had chosen to attend and was not hearing the voice of those who already felt alienated from it. It was apparent that I needed to consult the students in a more inclusive way and allow their voice to feed into any future development.

**Participatory Action Research**

The overriding objective of this project is to improve the learning opportunities available to my students. The outcomes are intended to be localised, practical and subject to ongoing change. My membership of the community I seek to change makes any traditional, objective positivist research impossible and is reflected in the decision to write this report in the first person, I do not claim to be able to create an objective distance from the problem but try to embrace its plurality and capture its complexities as best I can.

Consequently, I was drawn to an approach which not only acknowledges these challenges but embraces them –Participatory Action Research or PAR.

In most action research, including participatory action research, the researchers make sacrifices in methodological and technical rigor in exchange for more immediate gains in face validity: whether the evidence they collect makes sense to *them, in their contexts*. For this reason, we sometimes characterize participatory action research as “low tech” research: it sacrifices methodological sophistication in order to generate timely evidence that can be used and further developed in a real-time process of transformation (of practices, practitioners, and practice setting).

(Kemmis and McTaggart 2000, p. 591(emphasis in the original))

This summary shows that sacrifices in technical rigour are viewed as an acceptable price to pay in return for dealing with complicated contexts – clearly appropriate in my own circumstances. There is, however, an implicit apology in the language which suggests that a positivist, objective truth would be available if only resources and scale were available to address the issue.

Richard Winter (1989, p.27 - 37) takes a bolder approach by suggesting that the complexity of the social educational context defies a positivist conclusion since the unbiased, fixed point observer/researcher is an unachievable myth and the situation observed is constantly shifting. Therefore, he argues action research is the most effective approach for tackling enquiry into complex inter-relational situations encountered in educational contexts. It embraces the personal involvement of the researcher and accepts as necessary the idea that there is no absolute solution, that change has always happened and will continue to do so and that any ‘solutions’ will only be provisional and themselves subject to change.

This approach is based on an ontological position summed up by Jean McNiff:

Action Researchers believe that people are able to create their own identities and allow other people to create theirs. They try to find ways of accommodating multiple value perspectives.

(2002, p. 17)

While one of the key intentions of PAR is to be democratic and empowering (Cohen, Morrison, and Manion 2000, p.231). There is a danger that participation is considered unquestionably worthy. In their critique of participation in the world of international development Cooke and Kothari raise a number of valid questions which are also applicable in this context. A key difficulty is:

Do group dynamics lead to participatory decisions that reinforce the interests of the already powerful?

(2001, p. 8)

The threat of this is clear since the power vested in me as a tutor can skew the research process.

Students’ entry into the discourse is controlled by the teacher, thus positioning the student as a passive responder rather than as an active interlocutor in the discoursal process.

(Mann 2008, p. 111)

In order to limit the difficulty created by the inevitable power imbalance between me as tutor and the students, I sought the assistance of a graduate fellow and a third year undergraduate to support the enquiry. I reasoned that the combination of a fellow student and a graduate fellow offered the students an opportunity to encounter the project from perspectives which were more likely to be closer to their own.

The shape of these enquiries would need to be responsive to the emerging themes identified by the students themselves or as Richard Winter says:

The other way action-research seeks to unite its two central concerns – improvement in practice and increased knowledge and understanding – is by linking them into an integrated *cycle* of activities, in which each phase learns from the previous one.

(1989, p. 11)

This iterative nature is recognised as a key feature of PAR by many others. (McNiff and Whitehead 2002; Somekh 2006; O'Neil and McMahon 2012) It was crucial therefore that the project’s design allowed for this cycle of planning, consultation, action and reflection.

We decided to approach the students in a number of ways which would allow a wider opportunity for participation. Although my agenda was to address the extra-curricular provision (and I was explicit about that) I didn’t want to limit discussions to this. A concern for me was to try and capture the voices we had not been hearing previously. Obviously I could not make involvement in the consultation compulsory but I hoped a variety of approaches to gathering feedback would offset this threat.

The consultations were structured around questionnaires and focus groups – these were followed by adjustments to the provision, personal reflection and further consultation. In the first consultation eighteen students out of a possible thirty-two chose to join the focus groups and twenty-five completed questionnaires.

The questions were open so as to encourage rich qualitative feedback on the existing provision as well as providing an opportunity for students to make broader suggestions. To try and offset any sense of obligation for the students to be involved in the process we agreed that the focus groups would be led by the graduate fellow. Sixteen students agreed to be involved in three focus groups.

The feedback received at each stage was used to introduce changes to the workshops and to shape the next stage of consultation with a desire to be responsive to the emerging themes and concerns of the participants. This developing focus is described below.

**Consultation**

We were interested to find out how much of a sense of community already existed amongst the students. Of fourteen students who answered this question ten felt there was and four felt there wasn’t. One student said:

*I do not feel very engaged with the programme; I feel it is something students take part in independently, turn up to classes, go home and work, and hand in work and there is nothing else to it.*

Of those who thought there was a community, a common thought was that it was limited to their year group:

*Because it’s a small group we get a chance to get to know each other but I feel we don’t know a lot about the second and third years.*

In terms of the existing workshop programme a number of problems were raised. Reasons given for not contributing to writing workshops were various but typical are these:

*I haven’t wanted to share anything yet.*

And

*The forum being in the theatre with all the groups makes it quite intimidating.*

(Student feedback 2013)

Responses to the question ‘What kind of forum would you like?’ Presented two main areas the first was the request for an online forum:

*Maybe an online blog. Even something that could be anonymous would encourage the shy writers or the ideas you aren’t sure about?*

And the second a call for a less formal meeting:

*Possibly the same but in a smaller room with your year group.*

A common theme was a call for more focused sessions with an activity beyond the sharing of work:

*Something to help us brainstorm and develop a script beyond its initial draft.*

(Student feedback 2013)

In addition to these thoughts under the question ‘Is there some activity outside of modules that you think might help you to develop your writing skills or your understanding and engagement with drama and dramatic writing?’ there were a number of suggestions including:

*A small group of actors who go week by week rehearsing and questioning the text before performing it.*

And

*Role playing games, listening to radio plays. Hypnotism with the use of colours, lay on the floor and imagine.*

And

*Maybe having a social with other scriptwriters talking about our ideas and so getting feedback.*

(Student feedback 2013)

It was clear from the questionnaires that the provision was not fit for purpose with students finding it uninspiring and in some cases intimidating also that my desire for students to forge relationships across the year groups was not working.

In discussion it became clear that we didn’t have a sense of the relative importance of the suggestions made by the students and it was decided that the focus group sessions would try to ascertain this while continuing to ask open questions.

Encouraged by methodology from O'Neil and McMahon (2012) we asked the students to divide themselves into small groups of four or five to discuss the issues and suggested pie charts as a way of expressing their concerns. This approach allows participants to negotiate the importance of different issues raised and give them a weighting. Examples are shown in figures 1 to 3. In list form it might be difficult to know which of these issues were of most importance to the students but the pie chart gives a clear sense of relative importance.

[Insert Fig 1. Here]

The dominance in this first group (Fig 1.) of ‘Writing Space’ and ‘Socials’ is clear to see and two of the other categories ‘Music Motivation’ and ‘Bean Bags’ seem to be off shoots of the same ideas as part of a call for less formality. The emergence of a call for ‘Writing Space’ I thought echoed my own idea of creating space for play (as in a time allocation) but the students meant a physical space where they could go in order to meet and share ideas. This idea emerged in other groups too.

[Insert Fig 2. Here]

In Figure 2 a space to go is a smaller concern of this group but still significant, the social element dominating here. But in the third group it did not come forward at all.

[Inset Fig 3. Here]

In Fig 3 student concerns centred on writing activities and feedback methods. The next step was to draw together the students’ feedback into a summary and this summary was passed back to the students with some proposals for change.

**Changes Introduced**

Introducing changes in a way that felt responsive to the student contribution was a challenge which in some ways revealed a lot about the nature of the existing relationship between staff and students. There was no standard forum in which all the members of the course might meet and feedback of this kind might be shared. There is of course email, which is an adequate way of ensuring that everyone receives information but not necessarily a way of ensuring everyone reads it. The decision I finally took was to email feedback to all students and also to deliver it in in classes to ensure that all students were hearing about the progress. While this was efficient it further highlighted the silo nature of the year groups.

I was keen that students would see changes happening quickly and effectively. One thing I thought I could do very quickly was to set up an online forum for sharing of student work. This was offered almost immediately but in the first two months no one used the forum. On further reflection this is unsurprising since it was housed within the university’s electronic teaching platform and was not an informal ‘space’ designed to encourage students to engage in a sociable playful fashion.

In response to the call for more professional engagement and an opportunity to have their work performed, we were able to set up some new workshops run off campus by a local fringe theatre company. These workshops culminated in a competition, the prize for which was a production of the winning play. Some students engaged with the workshops but only one student entered the competition and they didn’t follow the rules! However, in spite of this limited take up, students reported that they welcomed the changes so we resolved to persevere and to troubleshoot the new provision. The other important event which happened without further intervention from me was the setting up of a scriptwriting society this was organised by the students through the Student’s Union, my only input was to confirm to students that they could do this. I will report further on the society below.

I was puzzled by the poor attendance in the first year of these workshops which seemed to offer many of the things the students had asked for: a less formal setting, a social focus and a potential for professional engagement with their work. It was therefore a key question in the next set of consultation.

My response to the ‘findings’ of the first round of questionnaires and focus groups came up with a positivist absolute conclusion that this was what the students wanted and therefore assumed that providing it would ‘solve’ the problem. The truth of the situation was of course more complex. Students reported that the reason for not going was the time which (for several different reasons) was difficult for students to accommodate. This highlighted the importance of ongoing consultation.

In the second year of the consultation we ran the workshops at a different time (chosen by the students) in a more central location and there was an improved take up. The competition was also run again. This time there were several entries and the winning play was produced. This has been further built upon in the third year of the process where the theatre company has integrated workshops, performances at the theatre and the competition in a programme of activity which has been extremely well attended. Overall there has been a trajectory of more engagement year on year with these activities.

However, the outstanding success has been the students’ own work at the Scriptwriting Society. This now meets three or four times a term, it has staged two student-written productions and members are creating a web series. The chair of the society when asked ‘why didn’t you start one before?’ said ‘we didn’t know we could.’ A clear signal that the process of valuing the student voice might in itself be empowering.

After the second year we felt that positive progress had been made but wished to confirm this. We arranged for the third year student to interview her fellow students and to see where the opportunities for creative play or risk taking were or were not happening and also to try to draw out whether students now felt more a part of a writerly community.

The emerging themes of this consultation were that students valued being consulted:

*We don’t usually get asked. Usually it’s just like… this is what you’re doing. Or turn up. Why didn’t you turn up to my class?*

Students felt well connected to their year group but the problem of not feeling part of a wider community of writers remained.

*Whilst inside our classes are quite tight knit, happy and comfortable around each other, the communication across years is virtually non-existent unfortunately.*

They really wanted to see their work staged.

*Something where we write stuff we get to see performed.*

(Student interviews 2015)

There was also concern about finding time for writing with the pressure of the course requirements:

*Well yeah, it says ‘Would you like to find more time for writing?’ ‘What would encourage you to do that?’ Well, having less important things to do!*

And a desire to make connections for social reasons:

*Occasionally I go to the Scriptwriting Society, but this is purely for the socialising opportunity it brings, and not because of a significant interest in writing.*

(Student interviews 2015)

The picture emerging was therefore, unsurprisingly, a conflicted one which is contingent, partly, on individual circumstances. The Scriptwriting Society was clearly meeting the social needs of some students and helping to create a sense of writerly identity for some though others felt it difficult to fit into their lives.

Responding to the ongoing interest from the students in meeting across year groups and the challenge of fitting things in around students’ complex personal commitments, we have in this third year created a hybrid version of workshops which can perhaps be described as ‘semi-curricular’. This responds to the students’ request to have these events timetabled so they could make a commitment to them and plan well ahead. This session is shared across all three year groups and (although timetabled) it is not compulsory and the content is entirely student-led. It is supplemented by the professional workshop strand and has created a weekly meeting point for the members of the programme.

It has only run for one semester but feedback from students is encouraging:

*Strengths are - lets you spend time with other year groups. Creating a bond.*

And

*The laid back atmosphere makes it feel more creatively charged.*

But it is not an uncomplicated picture:

*It can feel a bit awkward. Some people don’t seem to be interested which makes me self-conscious.*

(Student Feedback 2015)

In an effort to respond to the desire to see more of their work performed we are introducing a showcase next semester which will offer a script-in-hand performance. There are still students who do not engage with this process at all. However, attendance is much improved on the earlier tutor-led provision even though that was three times a semester and this is once a week. From a tutor perspective it feels possible for me to engage with the students as one community, which is good for me and seems to be welcomed by a large proportion of students.

**Ongoing questions – not conclusions**

The process of PAR has raised some useful questions to which those of us involved in the project have responded. As a result, the anticipated simple solution (redesign the current provision) has been revisited and now involves three separate extra-curricular initiatives and one curriculum change. These provisions are not set and will continue to change. Within the curriculum the most important development may be the timetabled whole group meeting of all years of students which has opened up a relaxed forum for discussion of both creative writing work and matters concerning the curriculum. I am not pretending this is a final solution to anything but it has created dialogue.

Involving students in pedagogical planning is a significant step in deepening engaged learning and might, therefore, be understood as a professional responsibility for academic developers.

(Bovill, Cook-Sather, and Felten 2011, p.143)

The prime motivation was always to improve the teaching provision and this report makes no claims for generalizable findings, rather it presents my subjective experience of the *process* of PAR. My direction of travel in this process is towards further student engagement in the development of their own curriculum which answers to the proposal that tutors should ‘Serve the important interests of the students.’ (Kreber 2013, p. 7)

My original desire to create a safe place for creative experimentation was of little value without the students’ sense of ownership. It also failed to take into account the lived experience of the students’ complex, busy lives which did not always make it possible for them to participate. What was needed was recognition of the manifold experiences of the students and an attempt to incorporate those views in any revision.

For students to feel a part of this imagined community of practice they would need to feel they could be co-creators of it. Wenger’s (1998) vision of what a functioning community of practice might look like is summarised concisely by Bridget Somekh:

In his later book Wenger (1998) analyses the characteristics of a productive community of practice as involving: a ‘joint enterprise’ which is negotiated and for which all partners are mutually accountable, ‘mutual engagement’, which involves diversity between participants but a commitment to doing things together; and a ‘shared repertoire’ of stories, artefacts, discourses and concepts, which are built over time and engender a sense of community…

(2006, p. 24)

It may be that the most successful expression of this community may be the creation of the Scriptwriting Society by the students. This has provided a social space which is aligned with the students’ identity as scriptwriters but is in no way owned by me. The response ‘We didn’t know we could.’ to the question of why they hadn’t formed a society before, would appear to be a good example of the inhibition created by vested power (Mann 2008) not allowing students to be part of their community of practice. It would seem that PAR was itself empowering since, by involving students in the shaping of their own experience, it showed them that they had agency and so they formed the society.

It is easy to become complacent. Student feedback is currently good, but so was the routine evaluation undertaken before the process began. Sarah Mann suggests, in some cases students may give positive feedback even when they are not satisfied because they believe this is the way things are meant to be. She goes on to argue that we must:

…find ways in which we can redistribute power in the educational process in such a way that students can exercise power over their own learning and development.

(2010, 17)

This redistribution may be about giving students a say in the curriculum (such as our timetabled whole group sessions) or may be as simple as drawing attention to their own agency (as in the creation of the student society) but the focus of this project has changed from extra-curricular enhancement to the value and purpose of giving students a direct input into the shaping of their curriculum, which it is hoped will work towards improved autonomy in their learning.

My final thought in offering these reflections to the Creative Writing community is that tutors of Creative Writing may be better placed to develop this iterative, empowering dialogue with their students, since the creation of trust in the workshop environment (the starting point for this project) is a common challenge in the subject. In tackling this many tutors already give of themselves in order to encourage the creativity of their students and to develop trust. As the Playwright Noel Greig said:

I do believe that, if we are going to challenge any group or individual to reveal their souls through creative practice, we must be prepared to offer something of ourselves to them, in whatever way is appropriate in the circumstances.

(2005, p. 203)

Greig’s approach is very similar to that described by the PAR process. Sumara and Luce-Kapler (1993) bring these two processes together. The writerly input required of the reader of a text like *The English Patient* is compared in their article to the engagement required of a participant of action research:

We believe that this is the fundamental power of action research as a writerly text: it expects research to be like the reading of *The English Patient:* unpredictable, often uncomfortable, challenging, yet always infused with the possibility of what the next page might bring.

(1993, p.394)

As a facilitator of Creative Writing practice I hope to create an atmosphere which encourages students to invest themselves in their writing, as a tutor in Higher Education I hope to promote engaged autonomous learning. PAR in Creative Writing practice may be a route to both.

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**Figures.**

Figure 1

Figure 2

Figure 3

**[Word Count 4749]**