THE AUSTRALIAN POSTGRADUATE WRITING NETWORK: DEVELOPING A COLLABORATIVE LEARNING ENVIRONMENT FOR HIGHER DEGREE STUDENTS AND THEIR SUPERVISORS

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ABSTRACT

After a decade of rapid growth, most Australian universities offer writing courses, from undergraduate to doctoral levels. The Australian Postgraduate Writing Network provides a series of ‘community of practice’-focused personal learning environments for postgraduate candidates and their supervisors in order to enhance their creative and professional skills and knowledges.

KEYWORDS

creative writing – research students – collaboration – PLE

[a] complete learning environment will require a continual examination and evaluation of the reciprocal relationship between the philosophy on which it rests and the teaching conditions which are thought to be in coherence with this philosophy (Lian, 2000, p. 21)

INTRODUCTION

A combination of economic pressures, internal and external competition, and an increasingly customer-normed higher education sector is driving the need for better, more efficient and more sophisticated systems of delivery. This is evident across the academy, and our interest is particularly focused on the discipline of creative writing, especially at higher degree level. What are we doing, as a sector, to deliver best practice learning environments to our masters by research and doctoral candidates, arguably ‘the jewels in the university crown’ (Krauth & Brady, 2006, p.14)? What are we doing – an equally important question – to ensure graduate research students possess the capacity to function as effective citizens, committed to collaboration and knowledge sharing, able to communicate in a variety of domains, and invested in lifelong learning?

A great deal, from some perspectives, not enough from others. Progress has been hampered as creative writing research higher degree (RHD) programs face conditions that differ significantly from research programs in other parts of the humanities and social sciences, and that call for different approaches to the delivery of learning environments. One difference is these programs’ youth. Though individual writing units have been offered in Australian universities since the 1970s, research degrees in writing are of much more recent origin, many of them dating only from the Dawkins era (1988 on). Since those reforms, higher education institutions have seen rapid growth in programs offering creative writing, and in the numbers of students wishing to study in that area. Now more than 20 Australian universities offer a range of degree programs in writing, from undergraduate to doctoral levels. Almost as many again offer a wide range of undergraduate and/or postgraduate coursework units (AAWP, 2008). This growth should be understood in the context of what can be called the ‘creative disciplines’ – university units and programs in visual arts, craft, design, creative writing, the performing arts (drama, dance and music) and film, television and electronic media production. In 2000, some 4 per cent of all university course enrolments were in these areas (Australia Council for the Arts, 2003, p. 5), but latest reports state that this has grown to 6.5 percent – or 1 in 15 of all tertiary students in the country (Schippers, 2006). The most recent Australian government report on higher education enrolments, moreover, adds that while enrolments in most fields of higher education increased between 2004 and 2005, the creative arts was among the five that which experienced the most growth during this time (DEST, 2007, pp. 7, 9). Though RHD enrolments in writing tend to be small, demand for the courses has at least remained steady, and in many cases has grown, over the past decade (Neill, 2008).

While this expansion has offered many opportunities for research degree candidates in writing and their supervisors, the rapid growth has resulted in what Paul Dawson (2001) describes as a ‘piece-meal’ approach to teaching and learning and its underlying philosophies. Writing courses are delivered in English, communication, cultural studies, creative industries and fine arts programs; some focus extensively on literary analysis, others on professional practice, others again on aesthetic production. In the absence of a national approach to the teaching of this discipline, writing programs have been marked by inconsistencies in curricula, research paradigms, supervisory
relations, and examination standards. Part of this can be attributed to staff expertise. The difficulty students experience in finding an effective supervisor has been pointed out by postgraduate students (see North, 2005); while supervisors have also published on the problems associated with research degrees in this area (see, for example, Dibble & van Loon, 2004). The problem can be attributed to a number of sources. An important is that, as is the case for many creative (and indeed professional) disciplines, writing program teaching academics come to higher education from highly diverse backgrounds. Some are drawn from the community of practising writers, and provide excellent undergraduate and postgraduate teaching in how to write, but typically have little or no research training, or knowledge of how to supervise a candidate in high-level research. Others are professional academics drawn from cognate disciplines such as communication, media studies or literature. These staff often provide excellent supervision in traditional research methods, but typically do not have a background in what are becoming widely known as practice-led research methods (Gray, 1996; Gray & Malins, 2004; Barrett & Bolt, 2007). The situation is exacerbated by the small size of most Australian RHD programs in writing, the geographical distances between many universities, and the wide variety of research areas engaged in under the umbrella of "writing". These factors militate against the development of a community of creative writers in the academy, and have led to many students and supervisors expressing a sense of isolation from each other as well as from the wider creative arts research community (North, 2005; Sved, 2005).

**The Australian postgraduate writing network: a case study**

The Carrick Institute-funded Australian Postgraduate Writing Network (APWN) aims to respond to, and ameliorate, these difficulties by building on the strengths of creative writing RHD programs at a national level. These strengths include a genuine desire to collaborate to solve problems in the discipline, as well as the creativity and flexibility of candidates and supervisors, and their high level of communication skills, especially in text-based media. Another strength is the very energetic national association, the Australian Association of Writing Programs (AAWP), now in its twelfth year. The AAWP’s annual conference, its fully refereed online journal TEXT, and the network of national and international institutional and personal connections offer considerable disciplinary input and support to a large proportion of Australian academics and higher degree students in writing. The APWN aims to enhance this institutionally-structured, but very engaged, community, and direct its assets to the construction and maintenance of an environment that will nurture and support RHD writing students. The network’s central aim is to facilitate the collaborative development of candidates’ (and supervisors) personal, aesthetic and intellectual potential beyond the boundaries of individual universities.

Central to the choice of structure for the APWN project was a desire to embed the ‘communities of practice’ model of collaborative interaction (Lave & Wenger, 1991) within a web-based personal learning environment. To do so, the project team sought and utilised extensive input from the community of potential users (including research students in writing, their supervisors and examiners, professional and community associates, and industry representatives) during the network’s development. Various aspects of a community of practice approach were important concepts in this thinking because such communities allow the refining, communication and shared use of knowledge that is essential to ‘the kind of dynamic “knowing” that makes a difference in practice’ (Wenger, 1998). Wenger and Snyder (2000) stress that such communities are stronger and more functional when members select themselves, while Lesser and Everest point out the importance of community input for sustained viability:

> the community tends to set its own agenda over its lifespan, continually defining itself by the needs of its members. Communities typically take part in a number of formal and informal activities, ranging from education sessions and conferences to day-to-day interaction designed to solve specific work problems (2001, p. 38).

Alongside this community input, the intentional flattening out of conventional academic hierarchies (such as those of student/supervisor, individual/institution) that is supported by the community of practice concept was also central in the setting up, and the early life, of the
APWN. Recognising also Trude Heift and Catherine Caws’ finding that collaboration in synchronous writing environments is ‘fostered when less knowledgeable students work with more knowledgeable peers’ (2000, p. 213), this smoothing out of rank was achieved by seeking, and utilising, equivalent levels of student and immediate past graduate input as well as that of supervisors, higher degree program coordinators and examiners.

Online communities of practice as learning communities

In planning and producing the APWN, we were interested in the harnessing the value of online communities of practice as learning communities (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Barab & Duffy, 2000; Rogers, 2000), exploring how they can be networked across individual institutions (Grisham, Bergeron, Brink, Farman, Davis Lenski & Meyerson, 1999) and how such online communities can successfully reproduce the ‘watercooler’ conversations, classroom activities, and social activities that take place in the ‘real’ world (Wenger & Snyder, 2000, p. 141). Perhaps the best articulation of this concept, and its clearest manifestation in learning communities, comes from the comparatively recent notion of Personal Learning Environments (PLEs).4

PLEs, understood sometimes in a purely instrumental way – as computer programs – and, more interestingly, as a teaching and learning concept, provide students with a personal space in which to organise and conduct their own learning. Scottish educator, Ewan McIntosh recently described them succinctly, as:

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\text{where the platform for learning outside the classroom belongs to the student, not to the institution. It's where it is highly personalisable. That does not mean it is individualised, but for me it means that it is the individual choosing which elements are most important for them (in Murray, 2007).}
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This central logic of personal responsibility, a kind of freedom, and the value of meaningful student-directed learning – is central to the thrust of the APWN. In providing an electronic learning space personalised for each user, but where learning is both individual and collaborative, it recognises research postgraduate students’ already-present capacity to learn, as well as their already-present ownership of their learning. It is both respectful of students, and entirely committed to academic values, including the value of lifelong learning for both those who are formally students and those who are also involved in the learning journey involved in being a postgraduate supervisor or examiner.

Such considerations are of central importance to anyone considering the axiological basis of higher education. As Pierre Bourdieu pointed out in his several publications on the subject (see especially Bourdieu, 1988, 1996), education is capable of transforming social relations by providing the whole population with both opportunities and skills. However, Bourdieu also makes it clear that education is as likely to reproduce social inequalities and social divisions as to ameliorate them. Any innovations in educational technology and/or pedagogical approaches need to bear this in mind.

PLEs have the capacity to rupture the negative patterns of higher education because they give students a sense of ownership over their own work, and provide a user community where students can build their own networks, their own knowledge archives, their own ways of negotiating their disciplines, curriculum content, institutional imperatives and ways of thinking and being. At base, therefore, whether considered as a software tool or an educational concept, a PLE must be driven by the user’s needs; it must allow users to write, to aggregate data or other content, to access and manipulate their own materials; and must allow open, and at least semi-autonomous, engagement with learning. This makes PLEs particularly appropriate in the RHD context, where candidates already largely manage their own learning journey, under the mentorship of their supervisor/s.

Yet this self-management and self-direction may also exaggerate the already identified isolation that many research postgraduates feel and to which writing postgraduates, in particular, attest (North, 2005). This is where a final integral component of effective PLEs, that of communication and engagement with others, comes into play. Communication technologies are central to the cultural, social and political forms of contemporary life; and while it is possible to trace globalising tendencies across recorded history, as scholars such as Armand Mattelart (2000) point out, such tendencies have been intensified and quickened by the use of communication technology, something that has brought about, Manuel Castells writes, ‘one of those rare intervals in history ... the transformation of our material culture’ (2000, 29). For our graduates to function effectively in the contemporary world, they need not only disciplinary knowledge, not only skills with digital materials, but also a confidence and

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4 Though virtual learning formally dates from as early as eighteenth-century correspondence classes, PLEs as such really only date from the 1990s with the increasing use of new technologies in education, and the development of electronic learning tools.
fluency in the values and practices of the online world. Ulises Mejias argues that the ‘true potential of social software lies in helping us figure out how to integrate our online and offline social experiences’ (2005). In an increasingly global and networked society, PLEs offer not only a culturally appropriate mode of learning, but also one that allows students to develop specific discipline-related knowledge as well as the sorts of skills and attributes that will make them better and more capable citizens and professionals after their studies: including collaborative modes of knowledge creation, sharing and review. In this aspect of our development of the APWN, we were motivated by the proposal articulated by Rafi Nachmias et al, that: ‘a key characteristic of knowledge generating communities … is the dissemination and mutual review of ideas and intellectual produce’ (2000, p. 98).

The APWN contributes to the development of such skills, qualities and values through the logic of its networked environment. An eighteen month long period of iterative development and testing (a process that is still ongoing) has delivered a web-based domain in which research students work alongside each other and their supervisors and examiners in using, refining and constructing an environment in which their learning needs are met, and their learning is facilitated. In this, they have available to them a range of databases (including information on available programs, supervisors, examiners, and areas of research interest); lists of links to useful and important sites (including conferences, relevant journals, funding sources and employment opportunities); weblogs and email chat lists; workshop exercises and writing spaces; and occasional online seminars (for instance, on the publishing process for students and on supervisory practice for new supervisors). Perhaps most importantly, the APWN provides research students and their supervisors and examiners the opportunity to network with each other and to form their own communities of practice, outside the institutional strictures and structures of their own universities, but in an environment that is still driven by academic values and learning outcomes.5

In our development, we have sought to integrate the usual ‘knowledge archive’ function of databases with a strong drive towards facilitating knowledge creation. In this latter function, the social networks created by the APWN will both cross-institutional boundaries, and use networking protocols (Peer-to-Peer, web services, email discussion lists) to connect a range of individuals, resources and systems within a series of personally-managed spaces. In this, the APWN’s e-learning spaces do not seek to disrupt or take the place of the learning in which the candidate is engaged as part of their higher degree studies. The network, instead, seeks both to be individually supportive and to build a sense of shared purpose and direction with the end point of knowledge creation, sharing and review. That is, to allow user-members to collaboratively produce, disseminate and refine information in a continuous cycle, while still satisfying their own personal academic needs.

Although it is still in the final stages of development, the APWN already includes not only the searchable databases of relevant expert knowledge common to such educationally-focused websites, but also a forum for the discussion of areas of concern and a number of training mechanisms for both students and supervisors. Users can add new areas of inquiry and discussion, ask for online workshops in necessary areas, and propose to lead those workshops. This means that, unlike many such websites that are produced solely to supply knowledge in the form of a mediated archive, the APWN aims to build a community of engaged co-learners. As is already beginning to occur in the late development phase with a growing community of users, we envisage that, as the Network (and these communities) develop, users will not only utilise, review and refine, but also create a significant proportion of the content and user features of the site, and direct its future elaborations.

Sustainability

By mounting the APWN in the electronic domain, we have been able to exploit that medium’s advantages: rapid updates, searchable sites; hotlinks to relevant points; low and sustainable maintenance costs; and speed of communication in both formal (we plan for workshop papers and a refereed publication of working papers) and informal (bulletin boards, chat rooms, weblogs and wikis) modes.

One of the problems of such learning environments is, however, that they are often developed in a flurry of enthusiasm but then remain static in terms of content, soon afterwards peak in terms of use, and then die. The World Wide Web is a graveyard of such inactive sites and here we return to the value of the underlying principles of communities of practice, and of PLEs. If the community has ownership of the

5 Until the APWN is launched and fully operational (from July 2008 onwards), we will not be able to report on the success of these tools and, indeed, that of the network itself.
site, and if the software works in a way that is both easy and useful, and if the community remains motivated by their own attributes, by institutional encouragement, and by an evident improvement in their skills, knowledge and confidence, we predict that the APWN should not just remain in use, but be dynamic and expanding. That said, we have not been able, of course, to test this in practice. We recognise that no software program, no community, no environment, either in the virtual or the ‘real world’, has an indefinite or eternal life. Research students and their supervisors are creatures of their times and their particular, individualised contexts. The context of postgraduate and research higher degree education is also rapidly changing in the face of political, economic and social change. With this in mind, we expect the APWN to function for its useful lifespan, and then face a natural death, as do all communities of practice. What is important, then, is that the community of practice which the APWN facilitates is sufficiently resilient, connected and aware that a newer type of learning community – perhaps a yet unknown mode of PLE – is able to be put into operation after the APWN itself no longer remains relevant or useful.

CONCLUSION

By setting up a networked, collaborative learning community using the framing rationale of a series of personal learning environments, the APWN seeks to service individual needs while providing a space for the establishment of an inclusive, supportive and responsive online community for researchers – both students and supervisors – in a relatively new field of higher degree endeavour. In doing so, the Network seeks to turn weaknesses (the wide variety of backgrounds, expertise levels and research interests; the small numbers of HDR students and supervisors at each institution and their isolation from each other) into strengths. The framing project rationale has been to attempt to exploit the potential of web-based communication technologies to increase real and ongoing collaboration and networking among students, academics and institutions. Providing a lively, intellectually grounded and supportive interactive online community for students, supervisors and examiners will, we hope, contribute to already identified disciplinary imperatives to improve standards, consistency, and information access across institutional boundaries. Moreover, once embedded in a series of Australian universities’ research degree programs in writing, the Network will, we believe, provide effective mechanisms for the identification, development, dissemination and embedding of best practice in the creative arts across the higher education sector in Australia.

REFERENCES


