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The Value of Distance: Teaching Creative Writing Online

Abstract:

This paper attempts to shift the discussion from asking how the challenge of distance can be overcome in online writing education to examining how the distance between teachers and students, students and peers, can introduce a ‘compositional voice’ into the teaching and learning process. In doing so, this will help to demonstrate that online teaching in this field need not be seen as simply compensating for the lack of face-to-face classroom interaction, but as a developing pedagogy that offers its own distinct advantages.

Biographical note:

Julian Novitz is a Lecturer in Writing at the Swinburne University of Technology, where he teaches both on-campus and online writing courses. He was the winner of NZSA Hubert Church Award Best First Book Award for Fiction in 2005, the BNZ Katherine Mansfield Award in 2008, and his short story ‘Tenure’ was shortlisted for the 2014 Commonwealth Writers’ Award. His most recent novel, *Little Sister*, was published by Random House Auckland in 2012.

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Introduction

Writing appears to occupy an uneasy middle ground with regards to its adaptability to online teaching. While there are no apparent material barriers to transplanting writing courses into an online environment (in that the primary activities of reading and writing texts can easily be performed in a digital environment), writing pedagogies tends to emphasise social and cultural conditions in ways that may be difficult to replicate outside of a physical classroom.

The writing workshop positions students in social arrangements with their peers and it is usually it is given that the students will receive their most valuable instruction through the social 'community of practice' that they form with one another (Nelson & Cole 2012). The ideal writing workshop is intensely social, rooted in both relationships and ideas, interactive, dynamic, adaptable and discursive.

Given the potential difficulties of replicating these conditions online, the question of whether online writing classes can be as beneficial for students is one that is frequently raised, both in academic research (Frieman 2002, Beck 2004, Conway-Herron & Morgan 2008, Andrew & Arnold 2011, Andrew 2012), and, in my personal experience, also informally, when I tell fellow writers and educators that I now predominately teach writing online.

To my mind, both the scholarly and conversational variations on this question are revealing, in that they place the emphasis on querying whether online classes can reach the same standard as face-to-face classes, rather than exploring the different or unique merits they might have. We tend to assume that the quality of online classes can be determined by their ability or inability to replicate procedures and experience of the face-to-face workshopping model. The face-to-face workshop is positioned as the more authentic learning experience, and an online class, at best, is positioned as working to compensate for its lack. This tendency to automatically privilege physical over virtual teaching spaces is worth interrogating, given that writing is itself a technology that can be perceived as compensating for the distance between writer and reader, and has also been presented as less authentic than spoken communication. My contention is that tendency to assess online writing classes in terms of whether or not they meet the standards of face-to-face classes can be seen a continuation of the long standing tendency to privilege spoken communication over written communication, to view distance as a problem that must be overcome in education rather than as a state that can give rise to new possibilities.

Writing as a Technology of Absence

The earliest recorded example of this perception of the status of writing in relation to speech can be found towards the end of Plato's *Phaedrus*. Plato presents a critique of writing that revolves quite specifically around the idea that writing is inferior to speech because it is at best a technology of substitution: the only value of written words is that they compensate for the writer's lack of physical presence.

Speech is characterised by Plato as being reactive, organic and responsive, whereas writing is lifeless, artificial and inert – at best an imperfect substitution for having a speaker present, at worst an imperfect copy of the writer's thoughts and that creates a barrier between them and their audience. Just as in-person workshopping is seen as offering a more genuine, unmediated learning experience than online classes, speech is presented by Plato as being better able to express true thought and feeling than writing.

Soc: I cannot help feeling, Phaedrus, that writing is unfortunately like painting; for the creations of the painter have the attitude of life, yet if you ask them a question they preserve a solemn silence. And the same may be said of (written) speeches. You would imagine they had intelligence, but if you want to know anything and put a question to one of them, the speaker must always give an unvarying answer... (67)

Jacques Derrida argues in *Of Grammatology* that this binary opposition between writing and speech established by Plato continued to inform Western attitudes toward language and expression well into the twentieth century. Derrida's famous deconstruction of the speech/writing binary in *Of Grammatology* examines this tendency to view writing as a supplement to speech, noting that to categorise writing as a 'supplement' means implicitly admitting that writing must perform tasks or functions that speech cannot, as a supplement is something that fills in for a lack in something else. In the often encountered ambivalence about online learning and education, this tendency to view oral communication as primary and written communication as secondary manifests itself once again, and can be seen to have influenced attitudes towards both distance education generally and the development of teaching strategies for online learning, which generally tend to emphasise activity-based group-work learning over individual reading and composition as a means of more closely simulating a face-to-face classroom environment.

Writing and Distance Education

The type of ambivalence towards online learning that I discussed earlier is not a unique product of the electronic age but continuation of the anxieties that surround distance education more generally. The online classes that are increasingly being offered by modern universities are descendants of correspondence education and have a shared history with them. Much like contemporary online education, the correspondence education offered by mail-based university extension programs was often viewed as secondary and dispensable in comparison to on-campus classes by university administrators, teaching staff and students (Caruth & Caruth 2012). The reasons for this might range from legitimate concerns about the quality of the programs to various forms of elitism, but I would argue that at a pedagogical level ambivalence about correspondence courses came back to the fact that, in the Humanities at least, writing rather than speech was the primary means by which both educators and students presented themselves in the learning environment. As correspondence students engaged primarily with written course materials, correspondence courses became easily associated with simplistic rote instruction, rather than the responsive, dynamic, ‘Socratic’ discussion found in “the sacred space of the classroom” (David Noble cited in Young 1999) that was seen as a more genuine and valuable form of education.

Attempts to develop a distinct pedagogy for online learning have generally attempted to shake free of the stigma attached to correspondence courses by finding ways to use networked technology to create a more interactive environment, tending to refocus education on peer interaction rather than interaction between students and instructors or between students and texts. In their 2011 paper Anderson and Dron trace the development of distance education pedagogies from the cognitive-behaviourist approach that defined correspondence learning, with the instructor acting as a content creator and the teaching conducted through individual writing and reading, to the social-constructivist approach allowed by online technologies, which emphasises many-to-many communication, with the instructor acting as a guide and discussion leader.

Gilly Salmon’s (2013) influential ‘e-tivities’ model of online learning presents a good example of the constructivist approach, as it emphasises student-student interaction. Salmon’s ‘e-tivities’ attempts to present a one-size-fits-all model for online teaching and has been highly successful as the emphasis that it places on the social dimensions of learning replicates the fluidity ideally found in a classroom learning environment and is easily translatable into a range

of disciplines. Furthermore, the role of the e-moderator is deemphasised so once the content and structure are in place then courses based on this model will be easy and cost-effective to teach. However, as Martin Andrew (2012) notes when assessing the value of this model for teaching writing online, 'e-tivities' puts the focus firmly on the 'present' time spent by the students in the course, completing tasks and interacting with their peers and says little about the self-evaluation and reflective practise required for developing writing skills.

In his 2003 paper 'Making Distance Presence: the compositional voice in online learning' Craig Stroupe argues that online course design increasingly uses technology to avoid the what he terms the authoritative 'instructional' voice associated with older, correspondence based forms of distance education, whereby the principle learning activity is the student receiving information via texts prepared by the instructor and writing responses that are evaluated. Instead, the structure and design of courses emphasis the 'conversational voice' where knowledge is built through the Socratic or social-constructivist practice of having discussion, associated with the ideal physical classroom environment.

Stroupe (2003) argues for the value of a third dialogic voice in distance education, one that is seldom utilised to the same degree as the other two: this being the 'compositional' voice. He suggests that what characterises the compositional voice, which focuses on the form of the text and the identity of its author, is its apparent withdrawal from direct conversation and its openness to dialogism, in that the self-conscious act of deliberating on composition, as opposes to simply instructing or conversing, creates a structure that may allow languages of different social contexts to speak to each other.

Stroupe's (2003) argument for the value of the compositional voice in online learning, suggests a means by which online classes can be seen as something more than attempts to simulate (or compensate for the lack of) a face-to-face classroom environment. Looking historically at distance education, we can see that while correspondence based learning was able deliver the instructional voice, its perceived fault was the lack of the conversational voice associated with face-to-face classes. The move to online learning as the preferred form of distance education has resulted in models that attempt to correct this by using the greater speed and convenience of online platforms to simulate the fluid back-and-forth conversational exchanges of the ideal classroom. Frieman (2002) and Beck (2004) observe that one of the advantages of networked technology is that it can potentially allow for the near synchronous delivery of questions and answers, content and critique between students and their teacher,

meaning that online discussion forums could be used to simulate face-to-face classes as closely as possible. Martin (2012) is sceptical of this position, arguing that costs and logistical considerations would in most instances render synchronous online delivery unfeasible for most universities.

Another reason for scepticism, however, is that in focusing so strongly on the conversational voice in online education we fall into the trap of trying to make online education ‘as good as’ or as close to on campus education as possible, rather than identifying and utilising the potential strengths of the medium. As observed earlier, writing remains the primary means by which students and instructors manifest their presence in online classes and to locate the value of writing in its capacity to replicate speech returns us to the binary identified by Derrida. If we are to view online writing education anything more than just an attempt to compensate for the lack of in-person workshops we must think again about how writing ‘supplements’ speech, what it can do that speech cannot, this time specifically in the context of education and Stoupe’s (2003) advocacy for the value of the compositional voice in distance education appears to be a valuable starting point.

Writing and the Face-to-Face Workshop

As noted by Andrew Cowan, most university level creative writing workshops combine or move between two distinct formats: the ‘generative’ workshop where students write responses to prompts and activities, which aims to provide them with inspiration or to experiment with their writing, and the ‘peer review’ workshop in which students comments and feedback on each other’s drafts with an instructor overseeing and moderating this process (Cowan 2012). In the use of both of these formats, though especially the second, the rise of writing workshops in universities from the 1970s onwards can be seen as an early example of the shift from cognitive-behaviourist models of the learning, where the focus is on the transmission of information in education and its retention by the student, to social-constructivist models, which promote student-centred learning, where knowledge is not simply reproduced by students but constructed through their interactions with their instructor and with each other in the classroom (the ‘conversational’ voice, as Stoupe would define it). In a constructivist learning environment, students “construct knowledge by interpreting perceptual experiences in terms of prior knowledge, current mental structures and existing beliefs” (Jonassen et al 1993:233).

As noted by Frieman (2002) the conventional face-to-face workshop aims to construct knowledge of writing in the manner defined by Jonassen et al., largely via group discussion and critique of student writing. Therefore, within the temporal space of the face-to-face writing classroom, writing is treated more as an outcome of the learning experience than as a part of the process. Certainly there may be space given over to writing in the classroom in the form of exercises, and students may learn a great deal from the writing that they perform individually, outside of class hours, but within the space of the classroom, writing is necessarily treated as the focus or object of discussion. In this regard, the conversational voice is paramount in physical classrooms, as the role of written text is to springboard the vital interactions that lead to knowledge construction and the compositional voice is engaged with in an isolated, individual manner beyond its borders. The student's individual engagement with the compositional voice is part of the process, but within the primary teaching and learning environment of a creative writing course, the workshop, knowledge is constructed through the conversational voice. Online classes (especially those in writing) can do more to take advantage of the fact that in most online teaching structures students not only present their learning outputs through written mediums, but also largely manifest their presence in the course through written compositions.

The Compositional Voice in Online Writing Workshops

In harnessing the compositional voice in education Stroupe (2003) encourages online educators to allow students spaces for reflective composition in the learning process, rather than only emphasising conversational interactions, noting that verbs like *discuss*, *respond* or *provide feedback* call for interaction based on the metaphor of face-to-face conversation which would normally exclude a compositional experience. Rather than simply segregating the compositional voice to the course's assessment, where the outcomes of knowledge construction are tested, he suggests that it can be brought directly into the learning process. Students should not just be encouraged to use the forums in online classes for conversational exchanges but also for 'textual performances' where students 'perform their rhetorical and aesthetic choices deliberately and at length after a period of sequestered preparation.' He notes that such a process may be less 'socially conversational' but that 'it can be more socially dialogical in the ways that the compositional performance gives voice to multiple social languages and brings them into ideological contact...' (265). Finding a way of doing so in online writing courses

would require us to occasionally move beyond the constructivist paradigm that implicitly or explicitly informs most creative writing classroom pedagogy. The dynamics of an online writing workshop can certainly provide communal spaces or encounters, but it also has the potential to bring the solitary or individualistic aspects of writing practice and identity formation directly into the learning process.

In my experience of online teaching, these preconditions have frequently resulted in a deeper level of student thought and analysis in response to readings, the work of their peers and the feedback that they have received than I have come to expect in the face-to-face writing workshops that I have convened. Rather than pushing students towards frequent conversational exchanges via the message boards, the classes in the online writing program that I currently teach generally emphasize a more reflective, compositional approach to participation. In the weeks where they are not sharing work from their draft assignments, they are expected to write 600 word referenced responses to a tutorial question and to provide a fulsome response to the work of at least two other students. In this regard, the generally asynchronous nature of online learning (where students usually complete class tasks and receive feedback from peers and instructors over the space of a week rather than over the duration of two or three hours, as they would in a physical classroom), can be seen as an advantage rather than a weakness, allowing more space for the withdrawal and deliberation that Stroupe (2003) sees as a necessary element of the compositional voice.

While rapid exchanges do sometimes occur, the expectation is not for students to be constantly active in the boards, but rather to provide an informed reflection on the topic or theme of that week's class and to engage with the perspectives of just a few other students in a sustained and thoughtful manner. In this regard, I view the tutorial activities used in this particular model of online learning as being similar to the 'textual performance' that Stroupe (2003) advocates in his paper.

While these classes do not replicate the spontaneity of successful face-to-face writing workshops they help students to construct knowledge and build skills by focusing on and privileging compositional expression, rather than attempting to use written communication as a substitute for speech. The strength of a good face-to-face workshop lies in its use of the social, conversational voice to improve a both student's current work and general skills, wherein the key work is largely created outside of the learning space as is brought into it as a subject for conversational critique. The very different, but no less important strength of the online

workshop is that it can provide a rare space in which written expression is consistently privileged over speech in every instance, as it is not only the subject of the learning process but also the means by which both students and instructors manifest their presence.

Conclusion

Rather than focusing on how the strengths of face-to-face workshops might be replicated in an online environment, we should think more carefully about the new possibilities offered by online delivery for writing as a discipline. Rather than viewing distance solely as a problem that must be solved through the use of technology, we should acknowledge that, as a discipline, writing is in a possibly unique position wherein distance between instructors and students, and between students and their peers, can also be viewed as an advantage or strength. Online delivery need not be seen just as an unfortunate reality that is being forced upon writing educators, but as an opportunity to more fulsomely explore writing as the 'supplement' of speech rather than its duplicate, allowing for an environment in which writing itself is primary and within which the compositional voice can be introduced directly into the learning process.

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