Federation University

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Liminal interventions in the regional creative writing classroom

Abstract:

Liminality is not only transition but potentiality, not only "going to be" but also "what may be". (Turner 1978: 3)

The vast region of Gippsland in south-eastern Victoria is home to approximately 270,000 people, with many experiencing complex and entrenched disadvantage. Most of my students are first in family, and very few aspire to a career in writing, or even consider themselves creative; however, they are, on the whole, hungry for knowledge, bright, and engaged. Many have responded with startling creativity and enthusiasm to specific exercises designed to foster writing practice and reading as a writer, and most have flourished in a structured workshop environment that affirms workshop method and process as a learned skill. Drawing on personal reflection, anecdote, case study and research, including regional teaching and learning scholarship, Sally Kift's 'Transition Pedagogy', Janelle Adsit's 'Threshold Concepts' and Victor Turner's 'Liminal', this paper reflects on some of the strategies employed in Federation University Australia's first-year introductory creative writing course to conquer resistance to the notion of being creative, facilitate creative writing practice, and foster a culture of creative writing production.

Biographical Note:

Based in Gippsland, Victoria, Threasa Meads is the author of two liminal autobiographies, *Nobody* and *Mothsong* (Rare Bird Books, 2016), and a visual artist with a PhD in creative writing from Flinders University. *Nobody* was shortlisted for The Australian/Vogel's Literary Award in 2008 and awarded a Varuna Fellowship in 2009. In 2012 she was emerging writer in residence at the KSP Writers' Centre. Her writing crosses genres and has been published in local and international journals including, *apt*, *Still Point Arts Quarterly*, *LiNQ*, *TEXT* and *Double Dialogues*. Threasa nurtures writers and builds creative communities, and is Lecturer in Writing at Federation University.

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Introduction

Federation University Australia (FedUni) is a multi-campus regional university and, presently, our creative writing program delivery sites are Ballarat, Gippsland and online. When I started at Gippsland campus in 2017, I began coordinating the first-year introductory writing course, which was taught for several years at Ballarat prior to the merger of University of Ballarat and Monash's Gippsland campus under the new banner of FedUni. In my first semester, many of my Gippsland students resisted the notion of being creative. As the new lecturer in writing, it was disheartening to find most students also placed little value in studying writing beyond its utility as part of a teaching degree. While a couple of students entertained ideas of being a writer, most viewed it as an unattainable fantasy career with limited real-world applications.

Having studied undergraduate creative writing at Queensland University of Technology, with its 'university for the real world' mantra and creative industries ethos, I learned the value of creative writing production and understood the competitive multiple and multi-modal career pathways open to me as a creative writing professional – opportunities I was encouraged to believe were limited only by my skill, determination, and imagination. When I taught in the humanities at Flinders University during my postgraduate years, I saw an enquiry- and empathy-driven, arts-for-art's-sake agenda in creative writing, where a focus on building and sustaining creative communities, gaining arts funding, and striving for excellence fostered a localised and outward-reaching culture of creative writing production. In both these locations, I found that a great many of the students avidly pursuing creative writing pathways came from some kind of advantage. They were either the second or the third generation to attend university, were middle class, or grew up in communities where arts production and/or arts and cultural consumption were part of the social fabric; frequently, they were all three.

I have always been acutely aware of my difference. I didn't possess the cultural capital or habitus many other students had. My experiences and understanding of the world came from grappling with trauma and poverty, and my resilience developed from surviving and overcoming the seemingly never-ending hurdles life had thrown at me. My educational foundation was fragmented and patchy, my culture gleaned predominantly from commercial television, radio and cinema. Reading had been actively discouraged in my household. My romanticised impression of university came from idealised representations in films and TV. I struggled with depression, anxiety, and a raft of other disorders as a result of childhood trauma.

When I was a PhD candidate, an academic – upon learning of my background – stated jovially, 'You're the rare one-percent.' At the time, I felt lucky to be so. I didn't transition easily into university as a mature-age student, but I was hungry for knowledge and determined to grow. As I moved between stages of knowing and being, transforming my life during my higher education journey, I became a passionate advocate for facilitating marginalised voices and promoting diversity in the arts, and, when I look back now, I can see that I was also my own advocate for a large part of this. I have always firmly believed that knowledge is power, and can attest to the fact that gaining knowledge has granted me power over my own life

circumstances. Along the way, I also discovered that I'm not alone in the one-percent category, as I continually meet many arts practitioners and teachers who have broken through disadvantage and are actively working in their communities to make a difference for the lives of others, some of whom have generously supported me.

It was with the goal that I might do the same for the communities we serve that I applied for the post at FedUni. My students, on the whole, are hungry for knowledge, bright and willing to learn, not unlike me. As I get to know them, I'm not surprised to observe that many of my students' limited or narrow aspirations for their futures and perceptions of themselves are completely at odds with their untapped potential. When I coordinated the first year introductory writing course again in the second semester of 2017, tasked with redeveloping the course for AQF compliance, I implemented a range of liminal interventions – drawing on research including regional teaching and learning scholarship, Victor Turner's 'Liminal', Sally Kift's 'Transition Pedagogy', and Janelle Adsit's 'Threshold Concepts' – in an attempt to conquer students' resistance to the notion of being creative, facilitate creative writing practice, and foster a culture of creative writing production.

Across the two years, coordinating the old version of the course in semester one 2017, coordinating the redeveloped version for two subsequent semesters, and then assisting a postgraduate sessional with coordinating the new version in the final semester of 2018, I've observed many students flourishing in structured workshop environments, and responding with startling creativity and enthusiasm to creative writing tasks in the redeveloped version of the course. The following offers a broad overview of the cohorts and the teaching and learning scholarship underpinning the redevelopment of the course. I reflect on the processes and activities employed, and speculate on how I might further develop the program, so that the students from Gippsland might have the best platform from which to contribute to the creative arts sector as creative writing professionals.

Gippsland

The region of Gippsland in south-eastern Victoria covers a large distance of over 42,000 square kilometres, with comparatively small communities scattered across a geography that is diverse and challenging (VIC Government 2012). Of the approximately 270,000 people living in the region, 1.5% being Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander people (ABS 2016), many experience complex and entrenched disadvantage. Vinson et al's 2015 *Dropping off the Edge* report (2015) identified the top forty disadvantaged postcodes in Victoria, with the highest rates of unemployment, criminal convictions, disability, low education, child maltreatment, family violence, and psychiatric admissions: a quarter of those postcodes are located in Gippsland. The town of Morwell, a ten-minute drive from our Gippsland campus, ranks as one of the most severely disadvantaged in the state (Vinson et al, 2015). Vinson et al's map of the pockets of 'most disadvantaged' and 'disadvantaged' – colour-coded red and yellow, respectively – shows most of Gippsland is red and yellow, contrasting with our other main campus in Ballarat, which is predominantly green, the colour code for 'advantaged'.

Unique challenges

As a regional university, we are familiar with the unique barriers – distance, cost, low academic achievement and aspirations – regional students experience in attending university (Gale et al 2010), barriers which are further amplified when individuals are also of low socio-economic status (SES) and/or Indigenous (Wilks and Wilson 2012, Behrendt et al 2012). Referencing a wealth of research (Connell et al 1982; Anderson and Vervoorn 1983; Williams 1993; Ramsay et al 1998; Clarke et al 1999; Smyth et al 2000; Teese 2000; Collins et al 2000; James 2002), Deborah Tranter illustrates the layers of complexity preventing students from low SES backgrounds attending university:

> These range from family and community expectations, financial hardship, ambivalent attitudes to education, short-term rather than long-term goals, limited role models/mentors, low self-esteem, poor literacy, numeracy and study skills, inadequate academic preparation, lowered expectations and standards, poor attendance patterns, the distraction of a critical mass of disengaged students in the classroom and an unstable, often inexperienced and sometimes uncommitted teaching staff. (Tranter 2005: 7)

When regional students from low SES backgrounds overcome these barriers and make it to university, they still have many more hurdles and challenges to negotiate. As Marcia Devlin and Jade McKay observe, 'Students from low SES backgrounds studying at regional universities often have complex lives and competing priorities' (Devlin and McKay 2017: 25).

Many of my students are struggling financially. They are juggling part-time work – often quite a distance from their home and study locations – with full-time academic workloads. Students are often carers, providing for their young families or other family members. Some young full-time students on government support, in families dependent on government payments, are contributing significantly to their families' household expenses, in addition to being carers for family members, while still being forced to look for part-time work each week by the government. Geographical distance is a problem. Some students who stay at home – choosing to maintain relationships with their community and connection with their families – find travelling to a campus with limited public transport options a challenge. I have observed students travelling for three or more hours a day between home and campus, and, repeatedly, students being unable to come to class when their means of independent transport fail. Many of our students are the first in their family to attend university: not only are they unfamiliar with the university environment and their roles as learners, some risk alienation from their friends and communities, as 'in some cases they may also be seen as stepping outside accepted social norms within their families, friendship groups and communities' (Devlin & McKay 2017: v). Considering the complexities our students grapple with, the importance for developing strategies to support their transition into and through university cannot be underestimated.

Transition

At FedUni we strive to embed a transition pedagogy in our curriculum design. With its six principles of transition, diversity, design, engagement, assessment, and evaluation and monitoring, transition pedagogy offers a framework and processes for designing an 'effective and supportive first year university experience' for our students, in addition to facilitating their progress through university and into their lives beyond it (Kift & Nelson 2005; Kift 2009; Kift et al 2010). In light of Vinson et al's 2015 *Dropping off the Edge* report and other research (Bateman et al 2013; Price-Robertson et al 2013; van der Kolk 2014), including our first-hand experiences with our Gippsland cohorts, we employ a trauma-informed teaching practice, which acknowledges that family violence and child maltreatment are, unfortunately, highly prevalent in the region. In my classroom, this manifests as an empathetic sensitivity to trauma and the after-effects that my students may or may not be grappling with. I offer a holistic, pastoral-care approach to their integrated learning and life journeys, linking them with support networks, such as campus counselling, discreetly checking in via email and in class, promoting self-care, and following up after absences, and non-submission of assignments, as well as designing a program that is inclusive and sensitive to how privileged discourse can silence, alienate and trigger some individuals[1]. I also draw on my own experience and research on the liminal, particularly in trauma and creativity contexts.

Liminality

Victor Turner's concept of the liminal, with its origin in the Latin *limen*, refers to a threshold or boundary, a space where people are in transition, grappling with the experience of being 'neither here nor there; they are betwixt and between … neither one thing nor another, or maybe both' (Turner 1995: 94-95). It is an experience not unlike going to university. It is a place and a state of transition that has also been 'frequently likened to death, to being in the womb, in invisibility, to darkness, to bisexuality, to the wilderness, and to an eclipse of the sun or moon' (Turner 1995: 95). My view of the liminal is broadly a site and a state of transitioning, convergence, intersections and flux, rather than tied to the particular elements of ritual that Turner – building on the extensive research of Arnold van Gennep – identifies in his studies of various cultures' rites of passage (Turner 1974; van Gennep 2010).

Traumatic liminal

In my own experience and research (Balaev 2014; Blocker 2009; Couser et al 1998; Couser 2004 & 2012; Douglas 2010; Henke 2000; Herman 1997; Miller & Tougaw 2002; Smith 1987; Smith & Watson 1992), I have found living with trauma and its after-effects to be akin to navigating the liminal. Trauma can cause a fragmentation of the self, a kind of slippage, an experience of instability, of flux. Judith Herman proposes that traumatic events 'shatter the construction of the self that is formed and sustained in relation to others' and 'cast the victim into a state of existential crisis' (Herman 1997: 51). Henke, in her study of women's traumatic testimony observes

that ‘there seems to be little doubt that trauma precipitates a violent fragmentation of the (perhaps fantasized) image of the integrated subject’ (Henke 2000: xvi). My experiential and theoretical grasp of trauma equips me with sensitivity to some of the complexities my students may face, enables me to curate course content that refrains from inviting traumatic life narrative (before students have the scaffolds, skills and networks that may support them in dealing with what emerges), and prompts me to frequently embed resilience-building opportunities in the program.

Creative liminal

I also consider the creative writing process to be inherently liminal with its transitional cyclical stages (Csikszentmihalyi 1996: 79), moving from the unknown to the known (Sullivan 2009: 48). Turner perceived artists, writers and philosophers to be ‘liminal and marginal people,’ often ‘highly conscious and self-conscious,’ in their practice, creating works where ‘we may catch glimpses of that unused evolutionary potential of humanity’ (Turner 1970: 128). In facilitating my students’ transitions, providing opportunities where they may discover their inner storyteller, develop professional skills as writers, and grow as questioning humans in a university program, I am ever mindful of Turner’s optimistic view of the liminal’s transformative potential: ‘liminality is not only transition but potentiality, not only “going to be” but also “what may be”’ (Turner 1978: 3). My liminal interventions not only facilitate transitions, they also seek to create spaces where potential can be imagined. As Jocey Quinn quotes Iris Marion Young – in Quinn’s quest to develop the notion of an imagined learning community and imagined social capital in universities – I, too, ‘want to claim universities as positive sites of unreason, as liminal spaces for dreaming new possibilities and sharing them with others’ (Young qtd in Quinn 2005: 14). I want to create a space for my students to transition into ever-bigger dreams, as they gain a broader view of their potential through learning.

Threshold concepts

In supporting students’ transitions in the creative writing classroom, I find the notion of threshold concepts useful, and I was fortunate to encounter Janelle Adsit’s work in the field prior to redesigning the first-year course at FedUni. In her article, ‘The writer and meta-knowledge about writing: threshold concepts in creative writing’ (Adsit 2017a) and in more detail in her book, *Toward an inclusive creative writing: threshold concepts to guide the literary curriculum* (2017b), Adsit proposes twelve threshold concepts that facilitate students’ ‘metadiscursive critical thinking and self-reflexivity’ (Adsit 2017a: 314) in the literary writing curriculum. Adsit explains that the term ‘threshold concept’ – made prominent in teaching and learning scholarship through the work of Jan Meyer and Ray Land (2003, 2005, 2006, and Land et al 2008) – ‘challenges disciplinary instruction to name the forms of meta-knowledge that a curriculum provides’ (Adsit 2017b: 304). Meyer and Land differentiate a threshold concept from a core concept, arguing that threshold concepts are challenging and ultimately transformative, leading students to irreversibly alter their ways of thinking about the subject, whereas core concepts (considered conceptual

building blocks), while furthering knowledge of the subject, don't achieve the same worldview-changing outcome. They contend:

> A threshold concept can be considered as akin to a portal, opening up a new and previously inaccessible way of thinking about something. It represents a transformed way of understanding, or interpreting, or viewing something without which the learner cannot progress. As a consequence of comprehending a threshold concept there may thus be a transformed internal view of subject matter, subject landscape, or even world view. (Meyer & Land 2003: 1)

For Adsit, the idea of transformation is significant to the threshold concept. In her article and book, she offers twelve threshold concepts – attention, creativity, authorship, language, genre, craft, community, evaluation, representation, resistance, theory, and revision – to guide the literary writing curriculum towards an inclusive and transformative education for diverse cohorts (Adsit 2017a: 304-315; Adsit 2017b). These threshold concepts are complex and troublesome thresholds, familiar and well-traversed by writers. In the following discussion, I reflect on three liminal interventions I've employed considering the above-mentioned research and consider what I could develop further.

Liminal intervention one: Sneak up on them

I've found even confident creative people can feel nervous and express insecurities when called on to demonstrate and/or articulate their creativity. My goal in the first week, when redesigning the course, was to get them reading, writing and inhabiting the space of a storyteller, and becoming receptive to being a writer in the classroom space, while trying to avoid the barriers coming up around students' perceived non-creativity.

Through simple reflective journal tasks and online and classroom discussion in response to two readings, I shift the focus to reading, writing, and being a storyteller. Prior to class, they are asked to read Archie Weller's short story, 'Walking with Mermaids' (Weller 2009), an exquisite story of a protagonist who grows up with a rich tapestry of narratives woven around him, as told to him by his mother and father, and the resultant love of reading and learning, which enrich his imagination. After the students read the story, I ask them to respond to these questions in the online forum:

> Have a think about people who are storytellers in your life. Is there someone who always takes the stage in your family or group of friends to regale you with a tale of something that's happened to them, or to tell you the latest gossip or news? Is this person you? Did you have a family member or a favourite teacher who read stories to you when you were younger? Do you read stories to children? Tell us about the storytellers in your life.

In class and online that first week, we then discuss what makes a good storyteller and the elements of storytelling.

I employ self-disclosure techniques, offering that I'm better at writing a story than oral storytelling. I tell them that I'm terrible at jokes in particular. I share that I need more time to reflect and rearrange words, and how I admire people who can do it on the fly. I reveal that I'm sometimes good at relaying what's happened at an event, or something that occurs during the day. Discussion ensues around how we all do this, and how we tend to emphasise certain things, condense events, and leave out unnecessary details, and I highlight that these are skills that all storytellers use. We discuss how we make sense of our lived experience through narrativising, asking ourselves: how did that thing lead to that, then to that, and so on? I connect these questions and their answers to how we plot events in a story. By the end of the discussion, students are agreeing that they are all storytellers in some way, and I introduce them to the idea that writing is developing these skills and strategies to tell stories on the page.

Then I ask the students to read, 'How to Become a Writer' by Lorrie Moore (1985). From the very start, it arrests readers with its humorous exhortations to try both grandiose and practical pathways to being a writer: 'First, try to be something, anything, else. A movie star/astronaut. A movie star/missionary. A movie star/kindergarten teacher. President of the World. Fail miserably. It is best if you fail at an early age' (Moore 1985: 117). I find it to be a playful exploration of the trials, tribulations and stereotypes of being a writer. We don't delve too deeply into analysing this story; rather, I use it as a jumping off point for a writing task. I pose the following task:

> Think about the playfulness of Moore's instruction-manual format. Now have a go at listing your own set of instructions for being a writer. Pretend someone has asked you how one might become a writer, and you are going to offer them five simple instructions. Make them as silly, playful or even as serious as you like. Just make a list from one to five.
>
> You could start with:
>
> 1. Find a desk, a notepad and pen…

One of the sneakiest and most beautiful aspects of this task is that in asking students to instruct someone else on how to be a writer, they are inevitably imagining what a writer is, and situating themselves as an authority on the subject, empathetically putting themselves in the shoes of a writer. It's fascinating to see the ways students tackle this task; many show evidence of drawing on similar stereotypes to those Moore references in her story, and no one baulks at giving instructions.

It was interesting to learn that Adsit does something similar with her students in the first week of her program (Adsit 2017: 123). She asks students to write a letter of advice to a new writer, in the tradition of Teju Cole's 'Eight Letters to a Young Writer' (2010), to position students as an authority on their craft. Her activity is more focused on community building and agency enhancing, rather than an overcoming of perceived inability. I think, in reflection, that I'd like to use her activity with an intermediate or advanced cohort, who have already overcome the hurdles my students are facing. I value how she asks her students to share their letters and select a

favourite sentence from each one to compile a list of affirmations as a community-building exercise, and I'd like to try this in the future.

I also invite students to reflect on their reading practices and describe a favourite story from childhood, in addition to describing what kinds of stories they currently read, watch and play (i.e. through video games). These reflective journal tasks and online and classroom discussions provide opportunities for students to reflect on what they already bring to creative writing through their backgrounds, their interests, and reading habits, and assists them with acknowledging their storytelling natures. The Moore task also enables them to open up a space, through their imaginings, to picture themselves as writers. Removing the focus on creativity and employing sneaky tactics seems to have had a positive result, as when discussions around creative practice and process emerge through the course of the semester, students approach them from the position of being creative writers.

Liminal intervention two: Reading as a writer and workshopping method

Reading like a writer and workshopping go hand in hand, and I agree with Paul Dawson's proposal in 'Towards a New Poetics in Creative Writing Pedagogy' (2003) that there is a particular way of reading like a writer that can be nurtured in a workshop environment that, while focusing on craft elements, acknowledges that the choices we make as writers aren't done in a vacuum, and have repercussions. In his call for a sociological poetics of workshopping, he argues that the

> aesthetic or craft-based decisions of a writer are always the result (consciously or otherwise) of ideological or political choice: the choice to employ social languages and the ideologies they embody in certain ways, and hence the choice to position a literary work in relation to these languages, as an active intervention in the ideological work they perform. (Dawson 2003)

I find Dawson's sociological poetics for workshopping align with Adsit's threshold concepts, and in particular two components of the program I've adapted from her material, which integrate her threshold concepts. As an additional resource for students and teachers on her website for *Critical Creative Writing*, Adsit offers four ways of reading in creative writing:

> Connective Reading – Reading to empathize, to hold space for what is being shared.
>
> Craft-Based Reading – Reading to construct how the text works.
>
> Evaluative Reading – Reading to expose the contingencies of evaluation at play in the text's reception, identifying the judgments that might be made about how a text corresponds to a contingent set of values.
>
> Critical Reading - Reading to interrogate ideological closures (i.e., how the author mobilizes commonly held assumptions). (Adsit nd)

I introduce these concepts to students about halfway through semester, as we prepare for workshopping. We discuss reading as a writer after they have already been

actively engaging in these ways of reading through the course content and activities, and we discuss the concepts, highlighting concrete examples from their experiences. We engage in a formal and structured workshop process, as I firmly believe workshopping is a learned skill, and I present this as an opportunity for students to practise reading as a writer, as they offer critiques on their peers' work.

I developed a feedback template from Adsit's exploratory questions for a fiction-writing workshop (2017b: 126-135) to guide students' feedback [see Appendix A]. This supports their developing critical vocabulary as they comment on craft-based issues, and encourages them to think more deeply about potential political, social, ecological, etc. impacts of the work. We discuss the reasons we workshop, and they are offered a framework for workshopping, with guidelines around language use, etc, and are introduced to 'The Workshop Contract' (Adsit 2017: 126-135) [see Appendix B]. Feedback is not graded for this introductory course; however, a grade is allocated for participation.

The students are arranged into small groups around week three, and writing exercises and class activities have a group component each week so that students can build bonds with each other. I find the small group approach especially valuable for vulnerable students, and I'm careful to observe group dynamics in the first few weeks to facilitate a blend of personalities for a supportive dynamic in the groups. I may merge some groups following observed absences in weeks three to six, to ensure groups have enough participants. Students submit their drafts via an online portal to their workshop group before the mid-semester break, and they have two weeks to read and offer feedback on their group members' stories before workshopping during the two weeks after the break. I encourage students to respond to as many questions as possible in the template, in addition to commenting on the stories.

The focus for workshopping in this first year is on meaningful engagement, supporting each other, building a professional identity, and growing a community, with a view towards delving deeper into the template and evaluating feedback in second year. The students take the literary agent approach when offering feedback in workshop that Miller and Paolo advocate in *Tell It Slant* (2004: 164-165). The students critiquing speak to their notes and converse with each other for twenty minutes, and the recipient of the feedback is given a solid five minutes to ask questions and discuss their intentions for the piece afterwards.

I've run workshops in university and community creative writing contexts, employing various strategies, with participants of a range of skill levels, for close to ten years, and this structured approach is the first time I've seen students so new to the creative writing classroom engaging in multi-layered and nuanced conversations about their peers' work with compassion and enthusiasm: it is heart-warming to see. I set a task at the end of the semester asking students to reflect on what reading as a writer means to them, and across the cohorts for three semesters I've seen recognition of the concepts applied in their workshop and revision, and general creative writing practice, as confirmation of their grasp of it. In the second semester of 2018, I coordinated an intermediate short story course with a mix of students who

had done the new version and the old version of the introductory creative writing course and it was interesting to observe a clear difference between the groups. Students who had done the newer version were more attentive to their craft, more engaged in workshop, more resilient when receiving feedback, and produced higher quality work overall.

Liminal intervention three: Additional workshop and Facebook group

In my introduction, I mention that I have many students taking writing as an elective as part of their education degree. The preference for students from low SES backgrounds to pursue a vocational pathway, such as teaching, has been observed in research on student aspirations (Alloway et al 2004; Gale and Parker 2013; James et al 1999). As James et al casually state, 'Teaching, as ever, is more attractive to the lower SES groups. We might speculate that the higher SES students are less pressed to focus on a vocational course and see a general degree as a useful first option' (1999: 84). In their key findings, Alloway et al observe that students from rural and low SES schools are more likely to aspire towards a teaching career than students from middle or higher SES schools who dismiss it because of the low salary (2004: ix). While enrolments in 2018 demonstrate a slight shift, with more students in the introductory creative writing course pursuing a more general BA than colleagues have observed in previous years, the likelihood that students from low SES backgrounds will aspire to pursue a career in creative writing is still slim. In their study of career aspirations of Australian school students, Jennifer Gore et al (2017) found students from the highest SES backgrounds are the ones most likely to pursue study towards a creative career at university. Considering that James et al found 'lower SES students place more importance on having a steady job than do other students' (1999: 31), I imagine the pressure to justify the tangible financial gain from study might be an influence. Perhaps the lack of knowledge about career pathways in the creative arts is also a factor, as one of my students put it, 'What kind of job would I get from studying creative writing?' in a tone that suggested they had already decided there were no options.

Gore et al (2018) recently studied the factors influencing students' aspirations to study in the arts, finding a significant lack of diversity among people who aspire to a career in the arts. They discern, 'Being female, from a high-SES background, a high ICSEA [Index of Community Socio-Educational Advantage] school, and being high achieving, with high cultural capital, and from an English-speaking background all increase the likelihood of expressing interest in a career in the arts. Careers in the arts appear to present a far greater challenge for less advantaged students' (Gore et al 2018: 10). While they issue a call for further research, they expose a disturbing lack of diversity in the Australian arts community and present troubling evidence that 'current patterns of participation in the creative arts are likely to persist' (Gore et al 2018: 2).

In response to losing so many potentially promising writers to their teaching degrees after their small foray into creative writing, I started a writing group on campus outside of their regular class time, where any student, regardless of their degree, is

welcome as long as they commit to developing as a writer. In this workshop, they write in response to writing exercises, read their writing to the group, and discuss concerns about writerly process and practice. This liminal space, in between their personal lives and their course of study, is where they are nurturing their dreams of being writers. It's a place where they are encouraged to develop a professional writing identity, and explore the multitudes of pathways open to them. It is a place where they are inspired to strive for excellence. Since the group started a year ago, most of the participants (approximately seven) have been published, some more than once. This writing workshop gives them a creative community, something many haven't previously experienced. I extended this community online to a private Facebook group that links the creative writing cohorts across campuses. I share writing opportunities, and students share their publication achievements. At this time, we have fifty-one members. It is my hope that some of the participants may see the value of their contributions to the arts and either change to writing courses or pursue writing study at university at a later stage in their career.

Conclusion

As I write this, FedUni is in the throes of completely re-visioning the BA for re-launch in 2019. In the new degree, discipline-specific courses in creative writing, unfortunately, won't be offered until second year. I now have the challenge of developing a creative writing course that is both introductory and intermediate, integrating all I've learned about the complexities of teaching in the regions so far, and learning a whole lot of new things. Comprehending the parallels between the transformative nature of the liminal and the university experience, in the particular context of diverse non-traditional students from regional and disadvantaged backgrounds, amplifies my passion to create spaces for my students to explore their multifaceted potentialities. Adsit's threshold concepts and my teaching and course redesign experience will underpin my future development of curriculum and extra-curricular activities. My liminal interventions in 2017 and 2018 have been simply that: interventions. I was redeveloping an existing course on the fly to ensure AQF compliance. I'm grateful to now have the opportunity to build a course with Adsit's threshold concepts embedded in the foundation, and through reflexive practice, learn how best to meet the needs of all my regional students.

I'm at the beginning of this journey and have much to learn. Many times, while writing this, I have questioned my motivation for encouraging students to pursue dreams of being a writer, when, surely, a job as a teacher would be more stable. But why does it have to be an either/or? When I read their stories, I can't help but cheer from the sidelines, heart bursting with enthusiasm, encouraging them to reach for their goals. We need diverse voices in our literary landscape, and these students have important stories to tell. I'm committed to doing my very best to help them have their voices heard.

Notes

1. Adsit offers a great checklist for unpacking privilege in creative writing here: https://www.criticalcreativewriting.org/unpacking-privilege-in-creative-writing.html

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Appendix A: The feedback template

(Adapted from: Adsit, Janelle (2017). *Toward an inclusive creative writing: threshold concepts to guide the literary curriculum*. London New York, NY Bloomsbury Academic) Page 126-135

Feedback Template Use the following questions to guide your descriptive analysis of your peers' work in preparation for our workshop conversation. In addition to filling in the template, highlight the relevant sections of the story with a highlighter, pen or pencil (or track changes in Word). Please refrain from using a red pen. Remember that our approach to workshop is not to evaluate a piece as good or bad, but to read for how it is crafted.		
Consider:	Ask these questions of the story:	Offer some thoughts and suggestions in response to the questions:
FIRST IMPRESSIONS: After reading only the first page, write down what, if anything, makes you want to keep reading.	What are you interested in at this point? What do you infer about place, character, and conflict from the title and the starting situation? Does the story seem to begin in the middle of things? Have you encountered an inciting incident in the first page? Is there anything in the opening that could be cut?	

	Do you feel that the story actually begins somewhere other than where the text currently starts? Where might the writer consider beginning the story?	
After reading the story as a whole, consider the following. Respond to each of the categories, in any order, in your written response.		
VISION, AUDIENCE, GENRE: Help the writer to locate the piece in the textual landscape.	How is this story similar to or different from other forms of cultural production that you have encountered—literature, films, songs, etc.? What does the piece remind you of? What associations are you bringing to the work as a reader? What genres and subgenres does it seem to call upon?	

CHARACTERISATION:	What does/do the main character(s) want? What compels the character(s) to action? In what ways are the central character(s) conflicted? What ambivalences arise in this story? In what ways do these character(s) embody contradiction? What from the characters' background influences their actions? What, for the characters, is worth fighting for, and why? What stake do the characters have in the story's central tensions? What cultural, societal, interpersonal, interior, psychological dynamics shape the characters?	
TENSION & SUSPENSE: Remember Charles Baxter's words that 'only hell is interesting.' Do problems and difficulties consistently sustain this story?	What does the character want, and what obstacles are in the character's path Remember that readers are often most invested in central characters who act and are not merely acted upon. What decisions are the characters forced to	

	make? How can the tension (and/or suspense) in this story be heightened? Are there moments where the story 'gives away' its tension or suspense? Does the story answer it dramatic questions too soon? What parts of the story have the most dramatic tension, and which parts have the least?	

SIGNIFICANT DETAIL:	Is there a balance of between 70%-80% showing and 30%-20% telling in the story? Is background information taking over and clogging up the narrative? Is the writer only conveying information that is absolutely necessary to the story? Do the scenes have a sense of time and space, with specific bodies moving in specific places? Remember the idea that 'nothing happens nowhere': Do you, as a reader, know enough about the story to be able to feel that the action is actually taking place? Are there opportunities for more showing that you can identify? Does the setting seem clichéd or stereotypical? Does it feel as though the writer has done the necessary research to find significant details?	

DIALOGUE, VOICE, AND POV:	What adjectives would you use to respectfully describe the narrator's voice, and each individual character's voice? What do you notice about the characters' voices? Are the voices consistent throughout? Do the voices contribute to the tension of the story and make you want to read on? Does the writer avoid creating a caricature or misrepresentation of a person or group through their voices, speech patterns, etc.? Is verb tense and POV consistent, and do these choices serve the story?	
THEME AND MOTIF:	Does the story support multiple interpretations? Does it embed layers of meaning in its content? Does the story offer significance that transcends the plot line? How would you describe the thematic material that the story is	

	working with? What motifs recur in the text, and what meanings are associated with them?	
RESEARCH: Suggest ways that outside research can help to support the story.	What in the story does not yet seem fully credible? What about the story's representation of people or places needs further development and complexity? How can the writer use multiple modes of research (e.g., observation, analysis, consulting secondary sources, etc.) to move beyond received ideas, common notions, clichés, and hackneyed content? Do you have sources to suggest this writer draw upon in revising this story?	

Appendix B: The workshop contract

(From: Adsit, Janelle (2017). *Toward an inclusive creative writing: threshold concepts to guide the literary curriculum*. London New York, NY Bloomsbury Academic)

Our Practice

1. We read every submission carefully and thoroughly. Every submission to workshop is worthy of considered attention, and every submission is read from beginning to end at least once.
2. We are generous readers, willing to follow where each piece leads. We avoid comments that would overwrite the piece—comments that seek to erase and replace the text that came to workshop; rather, we seek to uncover what is latent within the work that exists.
3. We acknowledge and identify our readerly biases and tastes. We recognise that the texts we encounter sometimes challenge us, and that can be a sign of merit and value.
4. We are mindful of the contingencies of literary evaluation. We value multiple forms of literary production and recognise that conventions differ across traditions. As we evaluate each submission, we identify the traditions and conventions that each text calls upon, seeking to locate the text in a diverse aesthetic landscape.
5. Our conversations and evaluations are respectful of the time and efforts of each writer. We treat each submission with care and humility. We value the work of the writer for its uniqueness.