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***Learning through Dialogue: Teaching and assessing creative writing online***

Within current university undergraduate teaching, with its emphasis on learning outcomes, generic skills and transparent assessment, and within the development of online teaching based on concepts of cognitive learning, debates about whether creative writing is an academic discipline - whether it can be taught, and who can teach it - threaten to undermine the discipline's value. In current tertiary education, as we are interested in teaching students how to write, it is no longer possible to claim in this context that "Writers evolve in their own way and at their own pace", that "Those students who want to write will have something to write about. If not, then it's best they don't write" (Wilding 3). The implication is that teaching has no business intervening in, or even fostering, the learning process and that writing is solely an individual accomplishment dependent on "talent". The assumption of this view is that writing and learning are separate issues entirely. But university educational and assessment requirements make it difficult, if not impossible, to sustain this view, which places more emphasis on an osmotic process where the teacher-writer instils, or inspires, ability into already-talented students. Rather, learning writing is part of a number of interactive dialogic and reflective processes. Not all students are talented when they come to our increasingly diverse classes; for some of them learning how to use language coherently and effectively will be their main achievement in doing a writing course; others will in fact discover their talent while learning in an environment that increases confidence. Allowing students to simply go off and "write" sounds attractive to all participants. But it does not engage with the learning and writing process, nor does it set goals and tasks to foster this process and it fails to provide a learning environment in which students can actively expand their knowledge and abilities. It also makes it almost impossible to assess their progress, providing few criteria or required outcomes. In order to assess their work transparently, we need to be clear, both to ourselves and to our students, what it is that we want them to learn. Doing this within the context of the interactive writing workshop promotes autonomous learning and a genuine acquisition of writing skills through practice and experience. This paper will argue that learning is effectively enhanced by the transference of the context of the writing workshop to the online environment, where the interaction that occurs is as much between students as between student and teacher.

The pedagogy of the discipline of creative writing has the capacity to fulfil important academic learning outcomes. For students learning creative writing, which uses a methodology based on a reading/writing approach to texts, these outcomes include gaining skills in language use, advanced reading and critical skills, and increased knowledge of genres and contexts of literature and writing. In its teaching methodology creative writing usually differs from other subjects taught in English or cultural studies departments in that it is student-centred and active; it promotes deep learning through active engagement with both reading and writing (Freiman). The interpolation of creative writing into the humanities curriculum highlights the distinctions in outcomes between a conventional transmission model of most

university literature teaching, and a model of student-centred learning where learning activities are directed towards the outcome of knowledge accumulation based on conceptual change. Because creative writing is student-centred, with students creating and responding to textual material, it forces teachers to focus on the student learning outcomes in the texts and responses they produce. Online teaching and learning, an environment which is particularly suited to the task-based, reflective activities of creative writing, provides opportunities for us to observe, measure and assess these outcomes.

This paper emerges from my own experience in the development and practice of online teaching in creative writing, using an interactive WebCT format. At Macquarie University, as part of the Macquarie University Online Teaching Facility (MUOTF), two websites have been developed by the English Department for the teaching of creative writing to undergraduate students. The two units are offered both internally, on campus as face-to-face workshops, and externally, as online distance learning. The teaching websites are password-protected for all enrolled students, ensuring that all teaching activity is confidential. A public area provides opportunity for publication of student work and other resources and links. The website content pages and discussion forums allow for the transmission of information, and the communication tools are used for interactive learning. Teaching method therefore combines transmission and interactive modes (discussion and critique of topics, readings and website resources), a large amount of task-based active learning (writing, reflecting, reading, rewriting), as well as student collaboration and interactive participation (workshopping, discussion). The creative writing subjects' aims are to encourage students to write creatively and experimentally, to develop their writing skills, to become self-reflexive about their own writing, and to develop their critical and reading abilities. Both units address a series of topics, which are both skills-based and designed to engage with theoretical concepts and contexts. These topics provide "spaces" in which students do creative writing responses, encouraging them to write and then to relate their writing to the contexts and issues addressed. Assessment is based on the production of crafted writing that demonstrates an engagement with course topics, participation in workshops, demonstrated processing of writing, and a self-reflexive essay.

For students enrolled internally, on-campus teaching is "web assisted", with access to content pages and discussion forums used to supplement and augment class activity. For external (distance) students all teaching and learning is done online. The enrolments for the wholly online offering have numbered between fifteen and forty students. For online teaching the discussion forums are used as a space for the simulation of the on-campus workshop format, with students participating in a series of two- or three-week long small-group (private) creative writing workshops. The discussion forums also include a "main" forum for all students, both internal and external, where interaction between groups effectively enhances a sense of community. The outcome of the online teaching has had some unexpected results, one of which is to contradict the usual external students' experience of alienation, dislocation and under-achievement.

The online simulation of face-to-face workshops, with the expansion of writing, discussion and reflection time, and the necessity for the written articulation of reading responses, have revealed some surprising benefits for students' writing and their learning processes. These processes are examined in this paper in terms of constructivist, student-focused and cognitive models of learning. Such models promote deep approaches to learning, where knowledge is constructed by student-centred learning activities that encourage an integrated or full meaning, rather than by surface approaches with activities of a low cognitive level that create fragmented outcomes. Constructivist models of learning assert that deep learning is achieved through "knowledge construction rather than reproduction" (Jonassen, 1993: 244). This construction occurs in an active context of "situated learning" in which the individual knowledge is achieved through generative processing and active learning:

"...learners construct knowledge by interpreting perceptual experiences in terms of prior knowledge, current mental structures, and existing beliefs" (Jonassen et al 233). While creative writing students learn by example, reading texts by writing practitioners, the primary activity of creative writing consists of students constructing their own texts. They do this within a "known" discourse of "prior knowledge and existing beliefs", but are encouraged also to write experimentally, engaging with new approaches. The boundaries of this knowledge are extended when they respond to given tasks, and when their writing is exposed to readers and the subsequent critique and self-critique of the learning situation. Thus a number of the processes of knowledge construction occur in the complex activities of the construction and workshopping of creative writing. Reading these processes through the model of constructivism gives us insight into what students learn when they do creative writing.

Most obvious is the individual nature of creative writing, where knowledge is actively constructed as text through formations of written language:

The most important epistemological assumption of constructivism is that meaning is a function of how the individual creates meaning from his/her experiences. What we know is internally generated by the individual rather than received from any external source... Meaning-making does not rely on correspondence to the world but rather is dependent upon the understanding of the learner. All constructivists believe that the mind is instrumental and essential in interpreting events, objects and perspectives on the external world, and that those interpretations comprise a knowledge base that is personal and individualistic. (Jonassen et al 233-4)

Student generated writing can be viewed as both the process and the outcome of individual knowledge construction. It is a process where, through language and the action of writing/reading "new" knowledge is enacted, or performed, and constructed. But the nature of writing/reading and rewriting/re-reading allows for constant processing and re-processing by the individual learner. This is the active mental processing of perceptions that knowledge construction depends upon and through which understanding is generated:

Indeed the superior learning that results from material that has been acted upon, and the finding that material is better remembered if it is actually generated by the learner (rather than equivalent material merely presented to the learner) has been termed the generation effect. (Jonassen et al 234)

The constructivist model also asserts that the individualistic construction of meaning does not preclude social functioning: "Common understandings regularly result from social negotiation of meaning which is supported by collaborative construction of knowledge" (234). In the creative writing workshop the student-generated text is engaged with socially, by being read and responded to, creating a context for learning through social negotiation and collaboration. In this context, cognitive understandings and learning outcomes are constructed through exposure to different possible viewpoints and through a process of "reciprocal teaching". Yet, importantly, constructivist theory recognises that collaborative learning allows for individual difference: rather than imposing a prescribed and objective reality on learners, "learning environment designers must accept that each learner will interpret the same object or event somewhat differently...in spite of our intentions, the outcomes of learning will vary" (234). As creative writing responses are highly individual, indeed they are required to be so, the challenge for the assessment of creative writing is to identify criteria for learning outcomes that can be teased out and identified through the process of teaching and learning, including the understanding demonstrated

through collaboration and interaction. The structure of the collaborative online workshop provides a context for measuring these generative processes of writing and understanding, new perceptions, and learning outcomes.

The online workshop provides an environment for active learning in which it is possible to see what students actually do in their learning. This can be difficult to monitor in classroom situations, given the diversity of students and the way they convey their understanding and engagement. In his article "What the Student Does: Teaching for enhanced learning", John Biggs examines models for tertiary teaching, using a student-centred model of teaching to encourage the highest possible learning outcomes for groups of increasingly diverse students. He describes student learning as the achievement of conceptual change, learning for understanding:

Student-focused strategies see the focus as being on bringing about conceptual change in students' understanding of the world, and it is what students do to achieve understanding that is important, not what teachers do. (Biggs 1999a: 61)

Moreover, stresses Biggs, students gain their understanding by "being active in a learning context" (60). It is clear that learning creative writing can promote deep approaches: it is based on what students do, producing their writing individually and workshopping it collaboratively. But it also requires that students learn to place their writing into contexts (for example, genre and literary forms, audience, discourse) and to relate their writing to different concepts about writing, language and representation. Providing a knowledge base for these wider concepts also requires the transmission model of teaching described earlier, the provision of course content. The reading response and the creative writing response to this content is then actively engaged with and understood by the student. Understanding though the activity of rewriting, drafting, editing and workshopping writing requires critical and reading skills, and the capacity to reflect upon one's writing in terms of process, language and context.

These active and student-centred processes in creative writing make it especially suited to online teaching and learning. For students who do all their interactive work online, the workshops consist of groups of eight or nine students working together in their own discussion forums. They post their writing to the small workshop group by attachment and provide each other with written feedback in group discussion which is visible only to that group. They also participate in online discussions on general topics with the whole cohort, or may choose to have a wider audience for their writing by posting it to the larger forum. But by workshopping their writing in small, private forums in extended workshopping time-periods of two to three weeks, these students are able to form supportive relationships and a sense of collegiality that is less likely to happen in the compressed experience (space and time) of the two-hour weekly on-campus workshop.

## **Learning environment**

Learning outcomes are significantly affected by the context in which teaching occurs. Context here includes the creation of a meaningful, relevant context for learning, against which students can measure their knowledge against prior known experience. This includes "problem-based" or "case based" contexts "that immerse the learner in the situation requiring him or her to acquire skills or knowledge in order to solve the problem or manipulate the situation" (Jonassen et al 235). Doing creative writing tasks, often as a creative response to a "problem" or topic, provides this kind of context where students actively engage in problems that arise in writing (e.g. point of view, dialogue, characterization, learning to "show, don't tell"). Frequently students

are required to question and re-think the assumptions exposed in their written representations, through their own cultural conditioning, with regard to issues of gender and ethnicity. They engage with, and learn about, the way their language constructs meaning, how language works at the level of textual construction and within social and cultural contexts. The context created by the workshop (online and on-campus) is a situation of "writing/ reading" in which writer and reader engage with each other in relation to the constructed text. (Here the writer is also reader, in effect highlighting the "readerly" function of writing, while others act as "audience" readers, enacting the "writerly" function of reading). As students provide the material, it is their initial constructions of knowledge in textual form that are then reflected on, engaged with and adjusted in a collaborative environment, resulting (ideally) in further constructions of knowledge.

This is an extremely exposed situation for students to learn in - to have their own work scrutinized by others is something even experienced writers find very difficult. The online environment provides a "screen" that allows and promotes this kind of activity, effectively shielding the students from direct face-to-face interaction, while enabling them to work interactively with others in a far more "objective" manner. One of the contextual conditions that promotes deep learning is motivation, and, as Biggs points out, an environment in which students "feel free to focus on the task, not on watching their backs" (Biggs 1999a: 61). This "freedom" allows time for reflection and consideration about their input and responses. Although reasons for motivation are more various than this, it is true that motivation increases as stress is reduced. In teaching online, it becomes clear that the expansion of time and the flexibility of online engagement creates an environment that can promote learning, and that it demonstrably enhances deep learning by encouraging higher level responses to set tasks. The online context provides a slowed-down, or "expanded", time structure, together with a clear focus on student learning. While the online workshop schedule is synchronous, using a timetable in order to help both students and teachers to organise their working patterns, it is also somewhat a-synchronous in the expanded time allowed for each discussion response. Within the extended workshop periods, students have the freedom to work at times that are preferred, or most conducive towards their own learning. The increased choice of learning time and the ease of communication with the teacher and other students again promotes motivation.

As a collaborative learning environment in which social negotiations of meaning and reciprocal teaching occur, the creative writing workshop provides opportunities for students to observe what other students do in approaching writing tasks and to listen to, and discuss the opinions of others. This aspect of "observational learning" provides insights into the learning that occurs in the writing workshop, and its simulation online: "...observing other learners asking questions [and writing], receiving answers [and feedback], arguing, choosing paths through the knowledge, or constructing their own knowledge structures...is fundamental to the learning experience" (Jonassen et al 242). While student creative writing which is in progress is "observed" only by the workshop group who form its working audience, accomplished and "finished" student work may also be published in the website's public area pages, allowing other students and any interested readers to access it. It therefore reaches a public audience. This outcome is highly satisfying for students whose work is selected, and motivating for those with ambitions to publish, also providing a relevant context for learning about issues of audience, publishing, privacy and the cultural positioning of their writing.

## A different kind of community

Biggs points out that understanding is reached, and deep learning achieved, when "Students can work collaboratively and in dialogue with others, both peers and teachers. Good dialogue elicits those activities that shape, elaborate and deepen understanding" (Biggs 1999a: 61). Behind the "screen" of the internet a comfortable interactive and collaborative space is created where personal differences and issues of confidence are less likely to interfere with learning. Students have confirmed that they feel it is easier to be honest and constructive when providing feedback online. In one case a student was unhappy with the feedback that he had been given, felt free to say so in a way which in the face-to-face workshop would probably have required more courage than he had, and others were able and willing to return to his now re-worked piece and provide more feedback, so that the student "got what he needed" through collaboration. This was possible because others could return to his work in their own time, so were more willing to be generous; the "screen" of the internet allowed the task to be completed without embarrassment and having to deal with personalities, body language and so on; the expanded time of the online workshop provided plenty of cooling off and reflecting time for everyone, so that the responses could be measured. There was time to give this student the constructive response required; the student felt "safe" to air his grievances.

Working collaboratively is especially suited to online discussions, the structured collaboration of the group providing responses to each other's writing. Online students can engage actively and reflexively in an exchange of ideas and the accompanying knowledge construction. The responses posted to the discussion enact learning "conversations", simulating the face-to-face environment in a context of expanded time that also privileges written expression (as opposed to body language, facial expression, etc). Thus student mental activity, including the reflection involved in having to articulate ideas in writing, is made visible in the discussion postings and comments. These comments are always a response, either to questions of theory and technique, or to group members' writing, and finally, they are reflective on the student's own writing and the feedback given by others. This mental activity promotes constructive learning, the understanding of how one writes and the context of one's writing (note 1).

### **Reflexiveness and diagnosis**

In all workshops, and for students who participate consistently, the capacity for considered reflective articulation of ideas on readings and writing is developed. Having all workshop interaction in writing means that there is a need to carefully think out one's ideas, to be able to support them, and express them clearly in writing. Moreover, the fact that they remain there for the duration of the course acts as a form of "published", or recorded, critique, promoting the motivation for good performance. At their best, online discussions form a progressive narrative thread, mediated by both instructor and students. One might compare this to the on-campus workshop where pressure to perform and anxiety tend to inhibit deep learning. The tendency then would be to adopt a surface approach, doing only what is necessary for marks, resulting in learning activities "of an inappropriately low cognitive level, which lead[s] to fragmented outcomes that do not convey the meaning of the encounter" (Biggs 1999a: 60). In fact, the online workshop can promote more significant learning successes, but strategic approaches will always be used by students who are prepared to do only the minimum amount of work. However, the online context allows for easier, and earlier, visibility, and therefore for the possibility of earlier intervention in students' learning activities. This is well illustrated by a case where a student whose writing was of a poor standard was proving to be an increasingly skilled reader of others' writing. It was possible - given that the record of his responses to others appeared in written postings and could be referred to in a positive way - to direct his skilled reading ability more towards the reading of his own

writing, thus developing his skill in self-reflexive awareness. While the outcome was a shift or improvement rather than a transformation, it is notable that here it was the less accomplished student (in writing) who could benefit, having his conceptual understanding changed, due to the increased attention given to individual learning within the structure of the online context. Within this context it is both the written responses produced in students' creative writing texts, together with their online discussion (response) postings, that enable a more accurate diagnosis and assessment of their learning processes than is possible in a face-to-face teaching environment (note 2).

But students will not necessarily achieve deep learning outcomes by writing simply what they choose. As their tendency in writing would be to remain within the boundaries of their already-known discourses, to further their learning they should be directed towards new levels of understanding through the challenges of experimentation and experiential activity. In constructivist learning "learners construct knowledge by *interpreting* perceptual experiences in terms of prior knowledge, current mental structures, and existing beliefs" (my italics) (Jonassen et al 233). This level of interpretation is inherent in the myriad linguistic choices and actions of creative writing activity in any case. But our concern is also with constructing creative writing as an academic discipline, and in tertiary teaching learning activities should be designed to encourage the more complex levels of response required of the advanced knowledge acquisition stage of higher education (Biggs 1999b, Jonassen et al, 1993). These are promoted through activities where students "perform" their level of understanding, that is, that they demonstrate this understanding through their learning process. Creative writing is both constructive of language formations, and reflective, demonstrating the constructivist emphasis that university teaching produces reflective practitioners - reflection being "a metacognitive strategy, that is, the process of thinking about thinking (e.g. thinking about how to approach a task)" (Jonassen et al 235). The generative process of knowledge construction occurs, as has been discussed, throughout the creative writing and rewriting/redrafting process, which includes class feedback, then more reflection and rewriting based on the knowledge gained about their work from their own and others' readings. The material is therefore repeatedly "acted upon" and re-generated. For the reader the process is also generative: reading a text that may not be working effectively, working out why this is happening, and suggesting ways to correct or work out the problem, is a complex task requiring a high level of analytical-critical and communication skills, as well as promoting reading and reflective skills. Writing responses requires thought, reflection and articulation of ideas in language. The online context provides students with the time to accomplish this in a group environment.

### **Assessing responses**

While online discussions use a more informal language register than formal academic or analytical composition, it is still possible to locate cognitive processes and articulation in this register, and when students are aware that their discussion activities comprise part of their assessment grade, they become quite conscientious in presenting themselves clearly. The informality and relaxed nature of online communication seems to free up the responses: unlike the formal academic essay format which requires presentation as a "finished product", the writing of online commentary appears as more of a process. It is this process which can be assessed. In my teaching, the assessment tasks include making a self-reflexive comment on a piece of the individual student's own writing done for a set exercise, and making a comment or critique based on one of the prescribed readings. This is part of a formative assessment (that is, the assessment is part of the learning, and integrated with the outcomes). In addition, students write a self-reflexive essay on the creative

process involved in their final work submitted for assessment, providing an opportunity to demonstrate the relationship of their writing and learning to the course issues and readings.

Assessing for reflexivity and relational responses is therefore built into the course structure, which, throughout the activities and assessment tasks, promotes the kinds of qualitative responses based on Bloom's Taxonomy of Learning outcomes, known as the SOLO Taxonomy (1982), an acronym for "Structure of the Observed Learning Outcome" (Ramsden 55). This taxonomy is based on a number of studies of student responses to their learning, and is widely used in developing criterion-based assessment, and in teaching for understanding (note 3) (Biggs 1999b). Learning responses are categorised broadly on a scale into two types, quantitative and qualitative. Quantitative responses increase knowledge content rather than understanding, and are classified as Prestructural, Unistructural and Multistructural. They are more encouraged by transmission styles of teaching, although motivated students whose learning approaches are deep will achieve the higher levels no matter what teaching is used. Qualitative learning, a deepening of understanding, occurs in the higher response levels, and is classified by Relational and Extended Abstract responses. Qualitative learning responses are encouraged in student-centred, active learning contexts, such as case-based or problem-solving activities, to which I would add task- or case-based creative writing. Teaching for understanding should encourage, or even require, the Relational and Extended Abstract responses, and my contention is that the writing workshop processes and reflective tasks all fulfil these qualitative learning outcomes. Biggs qualifies each of Bloom's response categories according to verbs denoting the response activity: Prestructural - "Misses point"; Unistructural - "Identify, Do simple procedure"; Multistructural - "Enumerate, Describe, List, Combine"; Relational - "Compare/contrast, Explain causes, Analyse, Relate, Apply"; Extended Abstract - "Theorize, Generalize, Hypothesize, Reflect". In the qualitative higher level responses, Relational responses show the ability to relate to concepts, staying with the task but demonstrating a high level of conceptual awareness and articulation; the Extended Abstract response "goes beyond what has been given" in the task. Biggs explains,

The coherent whole is conceptualised at a higher level of abstraction and is applied to new and broader domains. An extended abstract response by students would be a 'breakthrough' response, giving a perspective that changes what we think about them, and their relationship to teaching. (Biggs, 1999b: 39).

In teaching creative writing all tasks can be aligned to the requirements of the taxonomy. The creative writing text can, I believe, be assessed according to this taxonomy: When we set creative writing tasks we are asking students to respond to a particular skills- and/or concept-based area e.g. writing narrative, or point of view, or dialogue, or poetry in a particular form, and it is in the doing of the writing that learning can be demonstrated. Biggs' comments seem to align most clearly the Extended Abstract response with what we may conceive as "creativity" - breaking through a paradigm, changing the way we see things. While he appears to locate this breakthrough perspective in the way we see the student, it is precisely this kind of "newness" or breakthrough that we call "creativity", both in writing and in assessing student responses. Yet this kind of "creativity" can also exist without the necessary conceptual understanding and integration required to make the creative work more than a "snowing" - we have all seen students being purely "creative", producing what are really first draft, unstructured pieces that may have accumulated sparks of creative genius in them, but which need a lot of work! (We also see writing that does not extend students' understanding, which is competent but mimics genre so faithfully as to produce mere cliché. I would argue that this writing is not creative and does not engage conceptual awareness; rather it provides quantitative Unistructural or Multistructural responses.) So while it is possible to have a level of creativity in all



response levels - learning to do creative writing well requires higher-level responses if it is genuinely (coherently and conceptually) to produce writing that breaks through and changes how we see things. In witnessing the drafting and rewriting of pieces through several stages, as well as the "final" work, it is possible to demonstrate what has been learned in the doing. Some of this process might be made visible in online discussions. However, as the process of writing is also very often invisible, and takes place as part of the private activity and its infinite linguistic choices and adjustments, we often have only the finished product to assess, and therefore insufficient information about how students have come to their final "conclusion". It is for this reason that self-reflexive commentaries are important; they further encourage Relational and Extended Abstract responses, though they may only demonstrate the structural levels of understanding. The task itself encourages metacognitive reflection on what has been done, how it was done, and what has been learned, and it also requires a relating of concepts and writing contexts.

The online workshop, with its recorded responses and discussions, provides a valuable tool for assessment. It is possible to track students' learning process, and identify their responses according to the taxonomic levels, and as I have demonstrated, the online environment encourages (and allows) for more complex, considered and extended learning. My experience has been that students engaged in online learning, learn more effectively and make better progress in the extended-time structure and environment than students who learn in the face-to-face workshop. While motivated students whose learning approaches are towards deep learning are likely to achieve this level anywhere, those whose learning approaches may be more strategic, and random, are encouraged into deeper learning patterns through the more flexible online experience.

I have not gone into the student use of other aspects of the websites, such as creative stimuli, content and links, because while these are used to varying degrees, the dynamic interactive learning activity of the discussion forums, together with the writing submitted to the online workshops in response to topics and feedback, has been where most of the learning has been demonstrated. A final note on a very encouraging signal for online learning is the issue of access and equity. Over the three-year period that I have taught online, the ease of accessibility for students to this kind of teaching delivery has increased and improved. While there remain problems of access for students from different social and economic backgrounds, this is a wide issue for all online teaching, and indicates the danger of institutions which have ambitions towards money-saving by cutting down on face-to-face teaching. On the other side of the coin, however, the possibilities for equity in online learning are clear: The environment creates a space of equality, and I have taught disabled students who have functioned on equal terms with their classmates. One deaf student did not tell the group of her disability, until they found out on an on-campus day past mid-session. Another deaf student did announce herself, and everything proceeded normally from then on - clearly there was no indication of the difference that the classroom situation would entail, with interpreters, signing and other markers of difference. In another case, a student who was often too ill to attend campus was able to use the flexibility of online learning to do her work when she could, and was also able to find a vehicle of expression for her feelings about a debilitating illness. This writing was very moving, and the student may not have had the courage to introduce it in an ordinary workshop - the screen of the online environment enabled her to develop her autobiographical writing with the sense of security provided by the small online group. In other cases, students have been called overseas to deal with urgent family problems, yet continued to complete the unit almost without missing a beat, in fact valuing the continued contact with their groups, and their educational activities, during difficult circumstances.

It also goes without saying that these students bonded and formed friendships; in one case I was aware that a number of them met at a member's house to workshop their

work a weekend before the final assessment. When my schedule was busy, I found that I could stand back and allow the reciprocal teaching and learning to proceed without me, which it did very effectively. On other occasions, students workshopped their final works online, without my input, benefiting from the workshopping skills and confidence they had learnt in their shared judgements. Witnessing this leap by students into autonomous learning, has been the most gratifying aspect of teaching creative writing online. Nowadays we do not teach humanities subjects like English and creative writing only to produce literary writers; to claim to do so would be spurious and promote unrealistic expectations. As part of a larger system we need to cast our net wider, to teach in order to provide education, the knowledge and skills to those who will contribute to society as practitioners with a good understanding of writing, language and representation, and with the capacity to think independently and critically. John Stephenson terms this as "teaching for capability" in a lifelong context:

Capability can be observed when we see people with justified confidence in their ability to take effective and appropriate action; explain what they are about; live and work effectively with others; and continue to learn from their experiences as individuals and in association with others, in a diverse and changing society.  
(Stephenson 2)

## Notes

- (1) Cognitive approaches to learning stress "that learning is an active, constructive and goal-oriented process that is dependent upon the mental activities of the learner" (Shuell 1986: 415). Return to article
- (2) WebCT's compile function facilitates the reading and diagnosis of individual student performance. It goes without saying that students are fully informed about these website functions, which they can also use for their own self-diagnosis. Return to article
- (3) In which case there should be an alignment between learning outcomes and assessment tasks. That is, the outcomes should match the course content and assessment. Return to article

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### Letters and Debate

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