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My COVID teacher – pedagogy and technology: Frontiers of online teaching in the creative writing classroom

Abstract:
This article is an international collaboration of three creative writing tutors detailing our responses and practices in shifting from in-class to online instruction due to the COVID-19 pandemic. We are three scholars working at three different institutions (University of British Columbia, RMIT University, and the University of Technology Sydney) across two countries (Canada and Australia). We present collective autoethnographic responses and offer a menu of pedagogical practices for designing courses and teaching creative writing online. While one tutor had sound pedagogical practice in blended teaching, making the transition to online course delivery seamless, two of the tutors had little experience with online teaching and course design so their shift to online teaching was seismic, which led to unexpected creative solutions. Our insights are reflected in our narratives and the personal experiences that we bring into this article. The result, as discussed in this article, demonstrates how sound creative writing pedagogy can be designed for the digital classroom, and perhaps offer a post-pandemic glimpse into the future of creative writing pedagogy. Our article is largely anecdotal – neither comprehensive nor does it collate data beyond our small pool – our aim is to contribute and continue a conversation that has supported us during the pandemic. We have written to one another, with one another, and against one another, trying to articulate how we teach creative writing now, in an effort that others can continue the discussion of what they think and feel, will happen – what is happening – to creative writing teaching at other universities, states and countries, in the transition (temporary and permanent) to considering online teaching and learning as a vital part of our pedagogy going forward.

Biographical note:
John Vigna is an Assistant Professor of Teaching and Pedagogy Chair at the University of British Columbia School of Creative Writing where his focus is on pedagogical and curricular strategies for 5,000 Creative Writing students across the MFA, Major, and Minor programs, including online edX innovations. He is the author of *Bull Head*, translated and published recently in France by Éditions Albin Michel (Loin de la violence des hommes). His most recent novel is *No Man's Land*, released in 2021.

Rose Michael is a Senior Lecturer in writing and publishing at RMIT University. Her speculative fiction criticism appears in *The Conversation*, *TEXT*, *Sydney Review of Books*, *M/C Journal and Foundation: The International Review of Science Fiction*. Her

first novel, *The Asking Game*, was a runner-up for the Vogel and received an Aurealis honourable mention (short stories from it appeared in *Island*, *Griffith Review*, and *Best Australian Stories*); an early extract from her second, *The Art of Navigation*, was shortlisted for a Conjure award and published in *Review of Australian Fiction*. Her most recent speculative fiction appears in *Meanjin* and *Going Down Swinging*.

Penni Russon is a writing and editing lecturer at the University of Technology Sydney, and previously has been teaching creative writing at the University of Melbourne since 2007. Penni has spent several years as an interdisciplinary researcher, working with health and computer sciences on creating compelling and engaging online therapy for young people, drawing on her background as an award-winning writer and editor for young people.

Keywords:
Creative writing workshop, online teaching, blended learning, hybrid learning, digital pedagogy

Introduction

"We" want to tell you about our shift to teaching and designing online courses during the pandemic.

We want to write about research one of us had done pre-COVID-19. And how at the start of the pandemic in 2020 two of our creative writing courses, with no time for research into best practice, were abruptly transitioned online. There was no time to skill up, or source appropriate hardware to support ideal online teaching software – even if we'd been versed in appropriate platforms for teaching online.

The three of us had the good fortune to meet through a creative writing programs conference that was itself trialling a new hybrid model (AAWP, 2020). If there was any possibility that, like the year itself, the dual-delivery mode would not disadvantage our ability to network and make connections, we were intent on seizing it.

At the conference, two of us cautiously aired our untheorised ideas and random trials. We shared our embarrassing failures and, shyly, our successes. We watched our colleague from Canada present his pre-COVID-19 research on online learning – and felt like we were looking back (or was it forward?) in time. The two of us began to make connections between what we were doing on the fly in our respective institutions, and what our Canadian colleague's (John Vigna) careful methodical research had produced. Were we all moving in the same direction despite our different approaches?

The connections we made reminded us not of what our students were missing in lockdown, but of what they had gained: access. Previously unimagined access, and not only to us. We committed to writing this article, not to legitimise our experience by scaffolding it with a critical framework we'd had no real time to build, or referencing readings we had not previously researched, but to document a moment in time that continued – and continues – to unfold. Many of our discoveries, detailed here, are not new in the field of creative writing – or specific to our discipline. That writing programs can succeed online has been well observed, in *TEXT* and elsewhere (Andrew, 2012; Vigna & Rayner, 2019), but COVID-19 changed everything.

We start our discussion, pre-COVID-19, with research into blended and online creative writing learning from our Canadian colleague (Vigna). Research that made the switch to fully online learning during the pandemic seamless for him. We then explore how the other two of us (Michael & Russon) adapted to digital teaching on the fly, and consider, reflexively, how this Just-in-Time Teaching or JiTT (Novak, Patterson, Gavrin, & Christian, 1999; Novak, 2011) experience also resulted in an effective pedagogy. The rough-and-ready experiences that two of us learned further validated our Canadian colleague's methodical findings. "Cross-over writing" (Carlin, 2019; Michael & McKinnon, 2021) provided us with an unusual, playful method that afforded a "live" collaboration. Rose Michael and Penni Russon wrote into the same document in real time, changing each other's words, finishing each other's sentences, juxtaposing their experiences to find patterns, moments of synergy or discord, generating an autoethnographic collective voice that captured the breathless way colleagues were supporting and encouraging each other across institutions, countries and the world.

Together, the three of us offer a foundation for the next iteration in creative writing.

2019: Mapping the transition to blended learning – John Vigna

In this section I will discuss my experience redesigning the curriculum of 11 traditional face-to-face large creative writing undergraduate courses by creating a blended redesign (50% online, 50% face-to-face) of the classroom with a focus on craft acquisition, application and peer review. I'll discuss the application of a digital craft pedagogical model that includes: interactive videos and podcasts; critical reading and analysis with companion online evaluation tools to enhance and apply foundational concepts; and the use of peer- and self-assessment tools to provide students with a deeper awareness of their creative intent while fostering greater student to student and student to instructor engagement in-class. Since the start of the global pandemic (March 2020), when our institution went fully online, these blended courses made a seamless transition to fully online and paved the way for other tutors in our Creative Writing School to successfully make the transition from face-to-face despite their inexperience with the online format.

In early 2019 I surveyed students in our Bachelor of Fine Arts (BFA) Creative Writing Major program to gain a sense of their experience in the program (Vigna & Rayner, 2019). The

majority of BFA Major students come from our Minor program courses, which are open enrolment (67,000 students at The University of British Columbia) but not required as part of the BFA Major.

Our students were surveyed on their experience in the face-to-face classroom. More than half (57%) were distracted most of the time in class. Three-quarters (74%) were distracted by other students talking or distracted by other students' screens/devices (70%). Half of the students (51%) had difficulty hearing the tutor and more than a third (41%) had difficulty seeing lecture materials and presentations on the large screen. The majority of them told us that an 'interesting instructor' improves their ability to stay focused in a large lecture course (93%).

Finally, students recommended that more facilitated interaction with tutors, Teaching Assistants (TAs) and peers through active learning activities in classes (group discussion or work, writing exercises, think-share-pair, etc.) would boost engagement. This last point is the most telling. But I wanted to dig deeper into this, so I surveyed our tutors and asked them what they thought students wanted (2019).

Not surprisingly our tutors, who are all graduates of a Master of Fine Arts (Creative Writing) program and working professional writers, believed that students seek learning experiences through the workshop, where the students' texts under development, stories in progress, is the primary mode of study and discussion. In an internal survey (Vigna & Rayner, 2019), I learned that our tutors believed 90% of the learning should be provided through the workshop while the remaining 10% should comprise writing exercises, guest author talks, craft and technique talks, reflecting the Iowa workshop model, introduced in the 1940s and the cornerstone of creative writing pedagogy (Meyers, 1996).

Our students offered a different perspective when surveyed (2019). They stated a preference for spending 30% of their time workshopping each other's creative efforts, 30% of their time engaged in craft and technique talks, 30% of their time doing writing exercises and close readings of text, and the remaining 10% spent with guest authors.

This was a dramatically different perspective from what the tutors offered, especially how low the workshop ranked as a learning experience for the students. The question, in considering the redesign of courses using a blended model, was: how could a model be created to address what the students wanted and needed in a creative writing classroom while also honouring what our tutors felt were important discipline-specific activities?

With the support of a large Teaching and Learning Enhancement Fund grant through the Centre for Teaching and Learning Technology at The University of British Columbia I embarked on a three-year project to explore a different model from the face-to-face model that we thought students wanted: to identify one that they did want. I posited that our school's already large class sizes (200+ seats), which met twice a week throughout the semester, could offer a more accessible and efficient pedagogical model, one in which 50% of the work could be completed asynchronously, and 50% completed face-to-face, thereby reducing student commutes (the

average commute of our undergrads is about 48 minutes one-way). The face-to-face sessions would offer a rich palette of active learning, experimentation with key concepts, and collaboration.

In designing and developing courses, I instituted a collaborative approach. Two tutors would work together on each course redesign for each genre. This group of tutors across genres would meet regularly to discuss pedagogy, teaching practices, the nuances of designing courses that would best fit our students, aspiring writers. As a starting point, our team considered what writing means to each of us, the practice we all bring from our professional lives, one that was largely absent in the teaching we were doing. The key guiding principles for our pedagogical decisions were: transparency and open communication; experimentation and reward for taking risks; critical reflection and discussion; create and sustain community; writing and reading, and ensuring assignments aligned with learning outcomes.

To create a robust blended model for the creative writing classroom (class enrolments ranging from 30 to 250 students) our team wanted to offer students an opportunity to absorb material in their own time (asynchronously) through online pre-recorded micro-lectures and podcasts, interviews with working writers from across the world, assigned readings, discussions, and at-home writing exercises. An overview and checklist detailed the expectations for each week. The time spent engaging with the material on their own in the days leading up to the in-person, synchronous (either in-class or online via Zoom) session, gave students ample time to digest the material and learn at their own pace, without the distractions of a classroom setting, and arrive primed for building on their early learning.

In-class time could then be spent honing their craft through writing exercises and group discussions, informed by the online material. There was some review in-class (or in synchronous/recorded Zoom session if the class was 100% online), but the material in-class or on-Zoom was an application of what they learned on their own prior to attending class.
Craft and technique in writing talks were delivered through pre-recorded, instructional videos (micro-lectures) featuring the tutor. These micro-lectures were about 2–4 minutes long and there were three to five of them each week. These talks focused on theory, definition of terms, and craft and technique. They provided students with fundamental materials that aligned directly with the course learning objectives and formed the majority of the course content. Each video was preceded with a "thought-starter" question, something to help guide the students' reading and to encourage them toward key takeaways that were later expanded on in a synchronous session and/or a low-stakes writing experiment (marked simply as complete or incomplete). Each video included subtitles and a full-length transcript. Our analytics for each course showed that students relied on downloads of the transcripts, while often watching the videos at 1.5–2x the regular speed. It seemed that while they appreciated the interactive nature of the videos, they were drawn to the text of the transcripts to help them digest and learn the material.

Online and in-class components were truly "blended" so that each experience increased the effectiveness of the other, offering consistent, quality education across all platforms without

creating a "class and a half", that is, the perception that more work is required from both the instructor and student. Transparency was a key part of the fully online or blended experience: our team felt it was vital to remind students why they were being invited to complete the activities and how these activities fit into their learning by building toward their major assignments.

The weekly writing experiments were a key part of this – carefully designed writing experiments that offered a scaffolded way for students to apply their learning after viewing the micro-lectures, participate in close reading exercises and general class discussions. These writing experiments could then be applied to a major assignment. The key pedagogical decision here was that in being transparent we were letting the students know that there was no "busy work", or work that was perceived as a once-off and not connected to the course objectives in a meaningful way. Everything counted and was valued, risks and experiments could be undertaken without fear of a lower grade and therefore, one's process was the focus – the process of writing, the process of learning. This was something that students were engaged with throughout the course so that process, learning and writing were integrated and valued.

During class time (synchronous sessions) we made frequent references to work done offline (and vice versa, if possible). Students need to feel affirmed that the work they're doing asynchronously doesn't exist in a vacuum. We spent time bridging online/offline components by referring back to readings and online lectures often, drawing connections. If students engaged in online discussions, we would mention points that were brought up and circle back to those same points in class. Just as we prioritised a safe and positive in-class environment, we worked consciously at creating a positive virtual learning environment that fostered productive discussion, where students felt empowered to participate.

Our team wanted to offer a variety of ways for students to connect with one another, with the Teaching Assistants and with their tutor outside of class times. We used our online learning management system and other digital tools (like Padlet) to build community in various ways including through weekly announcements, virtual coffee meet ups and the online discussion board where students could respond to prompts and questions or share their writing experiments. We provided regular feedback, via discussion boards, our regular video and instant messaging office hours, and through one-on-one conferences. Student self-assessments, submitted to their TA or tutor, also fostered connection.

We remained mindful of building community in our in-class or synchronous online sessions. We used creative writing activities like close reading, workshopping, peer assessment, class discussion, student-led Q&A and writing exercises to purposefully build community as a pedagogical outcome.

Developing a shared vocabulary through assigned reading and lectures is particularly important for students at different reading levels, or those for whom English is a second language. We accommodated students with diverse learning styles to thrive by providing multiple opportunities for engagement across different platforms. Some students may not feel

comfortable speaking up in class, but will comment online, for example. In a live Zoom session, our team has noted that the chat function was highly active and gave more of an opportunity for students to be heard, to raise questions and offer reflections, than in a classroom. For my own class of 250 students I had two Teaching Assistants help facilitate the chat discussion. More students participated in this than in any other form of discussion, in-class or online, than we've tried before.

It's important to encourage peer-to-peer learning. Small group discussion is a common practice but can be stilted when students aren't adequately prepared for class. If students know they are expected to be leaders and educators in the classroom they're more likely to engage more deeply with the material.

As our team implements and continues to refine our blended model during the pandemic, a model that we have easily shifted into a 100% online delivery, we have developed the following guidelines for best practice:

- Communicate course objectives clearly and continuously throughout the semester;
- Bridge synchronous and asynchronous components by referring back to readings and video lectures often, continuously drawing connections between them;
- Ensure that the virtual learning environment is as welcoming and accessible a space for students as the physical classroom;
- Establish a predictable rhythm;
- Radical clarity and compassion;
- Put student wellbeing first. Always.

Students work hard, really hard, in the virtual classroom. In fact, I've never seen students work so hard in my course, a sentiment that is shared by the other members of my team. In previous iterations of the course that were 100% face-to-face, the work being produced was solid, but it often lacked intentionality and precision – the learning appeared to lack efficiency. Students seemed less equipped with craft and technique and more concerned with their grades. In the blended and online versions of the course, the quality of the work is stronger, there is a clear demonstration by students of craft and technique (as evidenced in their self-reflections and peer reviews) and more of a concern with unlocking the challenges of writing strong fiction, less of concern of their grades. There's been a significant shift in efficiency: the students are more deeply engaged with their work, with their peers, and instructors. They are utterly absorbed in their process as young writers.

2020: Moving online in the pandemic – Rose Michael and Penni Russon

In March 2020, we gave our last lecture. We stood at the front of an empty theatre, waiting for the clock to tick over to the allocated hour so that the automatic recording system would begin. It was the only way we knew how to upload a lecture onto the Learning Management System (LMS). It was just us, a handful of panicked colleagues and three students. The lecture was about how to write in the face of distress.

We ended the lecture with a shaky assurance that we would be with them. That, together, we'd find a way to make it work. One of us had left an apple on their desk. One of us had locked their very first on-campus office door behind them, not knowing when they'd never see it again.

And so, our first year of the pandemic began. A few weeks into the academic year, our world changed. How would we find each other? Where would we meet?

In the mad scramble to move online we didn't have time to carefully consider what platform we would use. Zoom was only an option if institutions had a licence, but there was talk of security issues. Many meetings were on Microsoft Teams but in early 2020 it didn't offer breakout rooms, and small group work was the backbone of our creative writing programs.

For one of us Collaborate Ultra (CU) seemed the obvious choice. It integrated well with the LMS, which was essential; we were keen for students to have everything in one place. But we couldn't see everyone, even if they had their cameras turned on. We could only see a handful of faces – often the same four as the platform "pinned" whoever spoke last and, as any tutor knows, this was all-too-likely to be who spoke next. (This functionality was updated in 2021.) If no one had their cameras on, as was often the case in large undergraduate courses, it was the tutor who was front and centre for the long length of a traditional face-to-face tutorial.

Whatever video conferencing tool we used (Zoom, CU, Teams), we rapidly discovered how exhausting it was to be the solo performer. The one animated face in a sea of static profile pictures. Or, worse, blank, black squares.

How could we see four different faces? Or, even better, see four different sets of faces?

"Why don't we rotate who's on camera?" we asked.

The students agreed. We would copy and paste four names from the participants list into the chat – along with a request for these selected students to turn on their mikes and cameras. We'd do this in alphabetical order so students knew when their turn was coming. We asked them to introduce themselves by their preferred name and pronoun (not what was recorded in their enrolment, which automatically appeared with their headshot); they had to say something for CU to "pin" their camera.

We decided to swap cameras every 25 minutes. This was the same length of time for our Pomodoro writing sessions, and proved long enough for students to relax and just 'be' on screen – rather than feeling they had to speak if their video was on. It also meant most students had a chance to be on screen during our longer classes. We reminded each other, repeatedly, that we were doing this to check in, not to put people on the spot. And to support the tutor, too: we were transparent about how much we needed to see their faces. And how much we appreciated their sharing their backgrounds: kids, parents, housemates, siblings popped in and out of frame. "Hello!" we said. "Hi!" we typed. We learnt each other's pets' names, recognised favourite snacks, became familiar with the sounds of different people's typing.

We called this the “fishbowl”, riffing off an existing method that modelled physically what we were doing virtually. That practice establishes an “inner circle” of chairs that has the responsibility to host a discussion – participants may even be allocated specific roles. We avoided the term “inner circle” because of its exclusive connotations and continued to leave our students to take up whatever position they wanted.

At first, we were nervous about asking anyone to enter the “bowl”. How could we mitigate the social-emotional risk? We joked about Thunderdome: “two students enter, one student leaves.” But was that what they thought? How they felt? We polled again. We asked them to message us if they had any issue; the feedback was resoundingly positive. They were appreciative. They wanted to see other people too, and be seen. Some said they needed to be invited to speak – and it wasn’t always, or even often, the students we expected.

We chatted. Not in corridors or doorways, not by coffee machines or water coolers, but through email, on messenger, via social media. We used the video conferencing tools we were becoming familiar with to connect with colleagues – not only those within our own writing programs, but from other universities. “How are you?” The conversation clarified; we were all in this together. What’s working for you?

We tried each other’s strategies. Another one of us gave the fishbowl method a go, this time in Zoom.

Students were allocated into five groups by the platform’s breakout room function. The random generation made the process feel gamified. Each group was allocated a week to lead the class discussion. Students were asked to engage with the main themes and ideas in weekly lectures and readings. They were told not to over-prepare, advised that doing the readings and watching the lectures would be sufficient. (Most of the time they did choose to meet up beforehand, but this was not requested). During the ensuing conversations other students were invited to use the chat to make comments or ask questions.

After the first five weeks the students voted to go again: they wanted to play Zoom roulette, to find their next fishbowl and make new “school” connections.

We have all taught classes where presentations are baked into the course design and constitute part of the assessment. The difference was that this was largely altruistic – they would be taking on some of the labour of the online environment for no obvious reward. Their appreciation for the chance to connect, to create community, and contribute to the culture of our online class was apparent. Even the name “fishbowl” seemed to delight them, it was playful and reflected something of the feeling of being in the Zoom classroom.

By the time one of us commenced workshopping, halfway through semester, students were used to switching their microphones on and navigating some of the awkward delays in the Zoom room. What was revelatory though, was the extra dimension: discussions could

simultaneously take place in the chat. And more than one conversation. Students could disagree or support each other without interrupting the flow. Students who were not in the habit of contributing in-person, were noticeably active. Others made an art of picking up earlier points, posting links to articles people were mentioning or might be interested in reading; asking or answering questions that might easily have been missed in the flux of face-to-face conversation.

When we started these experiments in shared responsibility our students stepped up because they knew the tech limitations demanded some kind of solution. They were so much more accommodating than we expected, so eager to contribute in more formal ways, that we began to wonder if some of them hadn't actually always wanted this structure.

The Course Experience Survey at the end of 2020 (and again at the end of 2021) demonstrated that students perceived a high level of engagement as a direct result of the format and structure of the class. Students also reported being motivated by the engagement of other students. Attendance was up across all subjects, as was the quality of work – in terms of assessment as well as participation.

"Thank you," we said.

2021/2022: Adapting to online teaching and learning

And so, it began, again.

One of us got a job interstate and began life as a "fly in, fly out" academic – a surreal shift after being confined to a five-kilometre radius – knowing that at any point the borders might shut. And shut they did, this time halfway through the academic year.

One of us was strongly encouraged to return to campus, only to realise how impossible it was to attend online meetings in a shared office, which was only made worse when both academics were in the same meeting.

One of us transitioned their blended course fairly quickly to a fully online course and was supported by their school to stick with that online delivery through the 2021 academic year and again in 2022. The goal was to offer students some semblance of consistency during the pandemic when there was so much disruption due to the ever-evolving nature of COVID-19 and its variants.

Meanwhile, our universities were introducing austerity measures. Creative writing departments lost long-term staff. Class sizes expanded as we welcomed students from other disciplines that were closing courses. The length of synchronous lessons shrank as we pushed more content online for students to engage with asynchronously, and new subjects were designed to be taught partly or wholly online into the future.

The pandemic offered us an opportunity to reflect on our respective pedagogies and student-centred teaching and build some of our new knowledge into curriculum design. We became more purposeful. We focused less on adapting and surviving, and more on establishing protocols for thriving. What should we continue? What would we change?

For one of us, the fishbowl made the cut. We ran staff workshops and developed materials to share it with colleagues. We observed more closely how it worked and why; employing our understanding not to change behaviour or the process, but to help identify and explain what we were observing. It was unexpected, the formal separation of speaking and typing roles demanded by the fishbowl strategy, of how it seemed to mimic face-to-face classroom conversations which often cluster around a central group of participants. And how that has changed, supported by engaged students, who have learned as much from observing the discussion as they have from contributing to it.

The tutor's role was radically, and rather wonderfully, de-emphasised as we let go and decentred our authority in the online classroom. Previously silent students actively contributed, and extroverts became moderators chairing complex multi-channel discussions. Sometimes the conversation was so lively we could turn off our own cameras and microphones. The success of this model encouraged us to offer workshops for our colleagues – who had already heard about it from their students.

Discussion and community flourished. Synchronous and asynchronous spaces began to – dare we say it? – blend. Tutorials, prework and online discussions began to flow into each other. We shared Google Docs or discussion forums during class time to allow students continued access to them outside of class and maintain uninterrupted workflow. One of us began to use Google Slides, but instead of presenting from them, they asked students to type directly onto presentation slides, recorded their breakout room discussions live and captured traces of their learning and co-creating knowledge. New creative work was also written directly onto the slides, so we all witnessed the words as they emerged: cross-writing as pedagogy, as well as creative practice.

However, traditional workshopping continued to prove challenging. In the first semester of 2020 one of us tried an asynchronous workshop, collecting feedback through Google forms, then recording a screen cast, synthesising the feedback. It was time consuming and neglected the dialogical back-and-forth of the usual workshop, giving the tutor too much authority. In second semester of 2020, the fishbowl worked in a class of 17. But in 2021 as undergraduate classes grew, we had to respond by sending students off into breakout rooms so they could workshop in small groups.

Students workshopping for the first time unsupervised in breakout rooms did not (yet) possess the necessary skills to critique each other's work. In a physical classroom we can listen for moments of tension, eavesdrop on awkward silences, identify opportunities to intervene. This is more challenging to do in breakout rooms. When the tutor does drop in, the rooms often fall silent.

One of us has always had reservations about the workshop anyway, and was happy to let it go. Instead, eager students were offered the opportunity to be in touch with each other directly in a four-year cross-program peer mentorship. We asked interested students to share their contact details via a Google poll, which would then allocate groups based on the genre students were writing in, across the entire program, regardless of level of experience. The response was overwhelming, across every program and every level. This was run again at the end of the year, extended to be an intervarsity initiative run by both researchers and a peer at another institution.

What the three of us learned

We tend to focus on lost opportunities when thinking about young people and the pandemic. We've watched our own children miss out again and again on all the important occasions: graduations from primary and high schools, concerts, camps, sport, music, schoolies week, gap years. Not to mention our peers – milestone birthdays, weddings, births, deaths, funerals, international conferences, residencies, research leave.

It is interesting to reflect on the other side of the coin. What skills, connections and experiences have our students learned? About adaptability, flexibility, seeking out community? Could they be more ready (ready for what?) upon graduation? Might they emerge as autonomous and skilful creative practitioners and editors and arts professionals? What have they learned from us, all of us, about resilience and perseverance; managing disappointment, anxiety and discomfort; doing the work, bringing it all to the page, perhaps, or finding a way of keeping it off?

Through our three respective experiences we've learned that while some things have worked – building community, taking responsibility, decentring our authority, encouraging active learning and deep engagement – it's still a work in progress. We learn as we go, the same way our students do.

The three of us now know, from our respective blended and fully online courses, that when students have more time and autonomy to reflect on the material before engaging in discussions and writing experiments the quality of their work is substantially higher. It's become clear that as tutors implement a mix of strategies (online and in-class) students feel more supported, seen, and safe, and that this is a key part of creative writing pedagogy. This is the necessary foundation that helps young writers take more risks, cultivating the courage to boldly express their creative selves in their work.

After three years of integrating blended learning into the 12 Minor Program courses, and a year of transitioning these courses to a 100% online model, John Vigna is convinced that online learning is here to stay and that it might even offer more rigour, more engagement, and more opportunities to learn than face-to-face courses. Rose Michael and Penni Russon are inclined to agree that the future of creative writing is hybrid, taking place at least some of the time in

online spaces. All three of us agree that there is more we can do with our students in a blended model than in the classroom.

We three researchers have observed students across four universities (Penni Russon worked at the University of Melbourne in 2020 and at the University of Technology Sydney in 2021), three cities, and two countries, to see learning gains and even feelings more supported online or in hybrid realms than in face-to-face classes. Students can learn at their own speed and engage with a community in their own time, bringing a more thoughtful perspective to their learning experience. Of course, 2020 was an exceptional year – though not as exceptional as we might wish, with 2021 following similar suit – and our data is a small sample at a specific moment in time: in the context of COVID-19, many students may have a renewed appreciation for education, and any community, whether online or face-to-face or a blended combination of both.

Distance education, diverse modes of delivery and blended learning are the realities of university-teaching in the twenty-first century. As technological advances continue, and students and faculty expect greater flexibility and access and, post-COVID-19, institutions face increasing uncertainty and austerity, online learning appears to be here to stay.

Perhaps the most obvious thread that the three of us discovered in our work (whether undertaken before or during the pandemic, proactively or reactively) is that, like any writing project, creative writing course design and delivery is an iterative process, one that requires constant interrogation and experimentation. When a tutor loosens the reins on their inherited notions about how to teach, when they allow their own curiosity and compassion to bloom so they can pursue alternative approaches, they learn side-by-side with their students and are a vital part of a creative community of practice. If we can cultivate the courage to take our own advice and not lean on what we know but lean into what we can discover, then everyone in the creative writing classroom – students and tutors, those in the bowl or beyond the bowl, those in-class or online – flourishes.

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