

Queensland University of Technology

Don Batchelor and Peter Copeman***The Wright Stuff - an Action Research Project in the Teaching and Learning of Playwriting in the Queensland University of Technology Academy of the Arts*****Introduction**

This article outlines an action research/teaching project undertaken in two phases in the Academy of the Arts at Queensland University of Technology throughout 1997. The first phase involved the redesign of an undergraduate playwriting unit, *Writing for Performance*, while the second comprised the actual delivery of the redesigned unit, with built-in processes for monitoring the unit's teaching and learning effectiveness.

PHASE ONE - UNIT REDESIGN**Background**

Playwriting at the QUT Academy of the Arts was, until recently, offered at the undergraduate level in two units: a second-year one called *Playwrighting*, and a third-year, more advanced one called *Writing for Performance*. These units, which were offered in the generalist Open Strand of the BA (Drama) (as opposed to the vocational Acting and Technical Theatre Strands), were co-ordinated by one of this article's co-authors, Don Batchelor, with guest lecturers and part-time tutors drawn from the ranks of working professional playwrights and dramaturgs (including, previously the other co-author of this article, Peter Copeman).

The notion of dramaturgical process is central to our conception of the teaching and learning of playwriting, yet the term 'dramaturg' defies easy definition. For the purposes of our unit we regarded a dramaturg as a playwright's peer mentor, with a function similar, perhaps, to that of a sports coach or an editor of fiction, helping the playwright to achieve their 'personal best' work, guiding them to see where they may be encountering problems of structure and so on. Traditionally the role has been taken by another professional - sometimes a writer, but also frequently a director, or even an actor or designer. Increasingly, however, in the Australian professional theatre - as in most Western countries - dramaturgs are defining themselves as a profession in their own right, with concomitant setting of systems for accreditation, standards of practice, training and so on.

The previous undergraduate units had thus been designed with a dual focus: the primary one was on the writing of scripts for performance, but there was also a strong secondary emphasis on developing skills in dramaturgy. This was in recognition not only of the growing stature of dramaturgy as a discipline and possible future career option for students, but also of the notion that developing skills in the appraisal and constructive criticism of the work of others is beneficial for the student's own writing as well.

The foundation unit, *Playwrighting* (with a student cohort of about 14 - 16) involved a series of lectures mainly on craft and associated matters, with structured small-group tutorials which engaged in a range of exercises from group devising of short plays to workshopping of students' script-in-progress. The classes culminated in a one-day 'Playfest' in which all the student scripts were given readings by their peers for invited audiences of friends, family and staff. The major assessment tasks for each student consisted of a) writing a short (15-20 minute) theatre script in a style, genre and performance context of their own choice; and b) writing an in-depth dramaturgical response to a playscript (the same one for all students - generally an early, complete draft of a play written by a more senior student and supplied with their permission).

The more advanced unit, *Writing for Performance*, was far less structured. It seldom enrolled more than a handful of students, and consisted mostly of students working on quite substantial (1 hour minimum) projects of their own choosing, with regular dramaturgical feedback mostly from the unit co-ordinator, but also to a small degree from each other in the form of structured sessions of dramaturgical exchange between pairs of students. There were few formal contact sessions of the group as a whole.

The Impulse for Change

In the midst of recent Federal funding constraints, the Academy of the Arts has seen a major expansion of its postgraduate component, and undergone its quinquennial review. This forced a comprehensive 'rationalisation' of the

Academy's undergraduate programs, with a substantial reduction of the overall numbers of units on offer partly for reasons of economy and partly to accommodate planned expansion in the postgraduate area. This 'rationalisation' has been achieved in some cases by shedding non-core units with lower enrolments, but wherever possible by consolidating existing paired introductory/advanced units into single units in an effort to increase enrolment numbers per unit. In the case of the playwriting units, it was felt - not without justification - that the kind of low-structured individual student supervision that comprised the previous *Writing for Performance* unit was more properly suited to a postgraduate level of study - especially in view of an emerging postgraduate demand in the area of performance writing stimulated by a strong commitment by Dr Rod Wissler, Head of the Academy's Centre for Innovation in the Arts, to performance as research.

In these circumstances, it had been decided in the review that the two previous units would be amalgamated into a single one, to be called *Writing for Performance*. In reality, however, this meant effectively discarding the former advanced unit; the single remaining unit would inevitably retain a good deal of the structure of the previous *Playwrighting* unit. It was also anticipated that the remaining unit would be harder to teach effectively under the pressure to do more with less - especially less tutorial support staff, and less time to step back and reflect on what was happening and how to cope with it.

However at this stage Peter Copeman became attached to the Centre for Innovation in the Arts within the Academy as postdoctoral research fellow in Asian/Australian intercultural theatre, with part of his research involving the writing of new plays. His research experience and interest in playwriting and its pedagogy provided the opportunity for reflection that the restructure of the playwriting units seemed to present.

The Challenge

Playwriting and dramaturgical processes are highly labour-intensive - the challenge was to design the unit to ensure that the externally-imposed reductions in contact time between students, lecturers and tutors did not result in a concomitant reduction in student satisfaction and learning outcomes.

Strategies

What we felt to be the most successful aspects of the previous *Playwrighting* unit were retained, including:

- a series of lectures by the unit co-ordinator introducing practical approaches to writing dramatic text;
- a series of guest lectures by practising professional playwrights; and,
- the 'Playfest' presentation of public readings of all student work at first draft stage.

However as a result of our reflections and review of the literature we decided to introduce a range of new teaching and learning strategies designed to encourage more independent 'deep' learning in the students.

Strategy 1: Student Learning Contract

As a further encouragement to active learning and commitment we decided to introduce a Student Learning Contract (SLC). An SLC is

a written agreement between a student and a lecturer, tutor or staff adviser that a particular activity will be undertaken in order to achieve a learning goal. [It] records the student's learning objectives and provides a plan of action for the learner to follow... [and] ...also indicates what will be produced as evidence that the objectives were achieved ... (Anderson, Boud and Sampson, 1994:4).

Laycock and Stephenson (1994:18) have identified that there are at least five ways in which the use of learning contracts has educational benefits for students:

- a) they help students recognise and clarify the roles of different stakeholders in their educational development, such as tutors ... and fellow students;
- b) they provide opportunities for students to develop a strong sense of ownership of their studies;

- c) they raise the quality of students' learning experiences by helping them to clarify their learning goals, to reflect on their learning and to address issues of assessment of performance;
- d) they provide excellent opportunities for effective collaboration - between students and students, students and teachers ... on matters directly relevant to each student's education;
- e) they help students develop a range of useful skills and build confidence in their own ability and personal effectiveness.

The scope for genuine negotiation by an undergraduate student in a one-semester middle-level unit is of course limited by the unit objectives, which are approved by the Academy and the University, published in the University Handbook, and so are non-negotiable. Moreover in our redesigned *Writing for Performance* unit it was necessary to make other elements non-negotiable, such as the acceptance of and engagement with a process of peer mentoring and assessment.

Nonetheless there remained a number of elements in which the students could express personal preferences, such as the style, subject matter and medium of their major playwriting assignment (within certain parameters), their preferred peer-mentoring team-mate, and their target final grade for the unit. We had some small apprehensions that this limited range of genuinely negotiable elements might make the SLCs seem to the students to be a bit of a confidence trick, until we made the connection in our minds between the concept of the SLC and the professional reality of the commissioning contracts under which most working playwrights operate. This enabled us to pitch the SLCs to the students as a mirror of real-world processes. A model SLC with fill-in and delete-where-applicable elements was included in the Unit Handbook.

Strategy 2: Focus on Conventional Narrative Structure

In both the previous *Playwriting* and the *Writing for Performance* units, students were always *encouraged* to write in conventional beginning-middle-end narrative dramatic structure - the most widely-used and enduring form of writing for performance, and one which can encompass a wide range of theatre styles from epic to naturalistic to absurdist, and from theatre to radio to film. Most students chose this structure - it is the one most familiar to them - but those who expressed a desire to write more experimentally or for other media (provided there was evidence of relevant background) were allowed to do so. Students were also permitted to present for assessment any twenty minutes of a full length play they were working on (provided it was contextualised) - rather than a complete twenty-minute play - on the grounds that this could extend the student's interest to complete the play beyond the confines of the unit itself. These variations, derived from a disposition to put students in a situation where they were motivated to learn, rather than to try to instruct them in a set of habits, had previously resulted in difficulties within the unit, especially in assessment.

However from our discussions and review of the literature we felt that some structured limitation *could* be justified theoretically and might, in the end, be liberating for the student writers in that it provided the security of structure and greater clarity of direction. For instance novelist, scriptwriter and writing teacher Glenda Adams (Adams 1991:28) has stated that the conventional forms of writing - plot, character, setting, theme - provide for the beginning writer an important means and method to explore and discover meaning and achieve a distinctive voice, and are far more important than the particular genre of the writing, especially in the case of experimental, ficto-critical, anti-narrative, postmodern writing. And as Raymond Carver (Carver 1985:25) puts it, 'too often 'experimentation' is a licence to be careless, silly or imitative'.

We also agreed that twenty minutes of a longer script allowed students to side-step the challenges entailed in writing a *complete* short narrative.

These considerations became the grounds for insisting in the new unit that students would write a complete short narrative performance script.

Strategy 3: Comprehensive Study Guide (Unit Handbook)

Any less favourable student/staff ratio resulting from the restructure implied that students would inevitably have to fend for themselves more than previously in the units. While there are sound pedagogical reasons for fostering greater self-reliance - Gibbs, for instance, has noted the contribution to 'deep learning' of independent approaches (Gibbs 1993:10) - this meant in our case that if the unit were still to be a rewarding learning experience for the students, there would need to be more structured guidance of the self-help process.

This was achieved by means of the preparation of a comprehensive Handbook to complement the required university standard unit outline. It included a vision statement and a discursive 'outcomes' section explaining the complexity of

writing for performance and encouraging an active approach to independent learning by the students.

Even more detailed was the section on assessment tasks, designed as incremental stages towards the completion of a second draft of a short playscript, comprising for each student:

- writing a 2-3 page storyline conceptually demonstrating a central character, predicament, goals, obstacles, crisis and resolution;
- written dramaturgical appraisal of another student's storyline;
- writing a comprehensive backstory (biography) of the central character;
- writing a first draft of the playscript;
- written dramaturgical appraisal of another student's first draft;
- organising, directing rehearsals of, and presenting a public reading of another student's first draft;
- having their own script rehearsed and presented in a public reading, and participating in post-reading discussions of the work; and
- writing a second draft of the playscript taking on board dramaturgical feedback and audience response from the reading.

The Handbook included step-by-step procedures for each of these tasks, with exegesis on the purpose of each step and some of the common problems students might encounter. With each of the tasks was also included a set of Guidelines/Criteria serving three functions:

- as an indication of what students should aim to accomplish in the task,
- as criteria for students to apply when appraising their team-mates' work dramaturgically; and
- as criteria against which the completed task could be assessed for marking.

The Handbook also included selected readings, a standard Australian Writers' Guild script format, dramatic structure outlines, a questionnaire to assist with developing character backstories, and guidelines (borrowed with permission from the Brisbane-based script development agency Playlab) for approaching assessments and other dramaturgical tasks.

Strategy 4: Peer Mentoring and Assessment

The need in terms both of educational philosophy and of resource necessity to work with less staff/student contact meant it was also necessary to find other mechanisms for providing constructive feedback to students on the various stages of their writing work.

The secondary focus of the unit - dramaturgy - suggested the solution. Instead of undertaking unrelated exercises in writing and dramaturgy, the students would work in paired writer/dramaturg teams, constructively appraising each others' work at key stages of development, according to criteria and guidelines regarding etiquette, and under the general supervision of experienced tutor/markers.

Peer mentoring is not a new concept in education - it was systematised at least as early as the work of Andrew Bell in India in the late eighteenth century (Goodlad & Hirst, 1989:14). Since the role of professional teachers is increasingly one of resource and learning management and less one of direct service, it is reassuring to know that previous research has demonstrated that a well managed peer mentoring process has pedagogical advantages:

The interaction between the vast majority of pairs is usually manifestly positive, and good relationships endure beyond the tutoring situation. Because the peer tutor project is 'special' its integral subject material enjoys high status during and after the project (Topping, 1988:10).

Peer mentoring in *Writing for Performance*, we felt, would give real responsibility and seriousness of purpose when a student was acting as dramaturg on a fellow student's work. A further edge was given to this sense of responsibility when we decided that if students were assessing each others' work, why not *mark* it as well? Not the full mark - but marks amounting to a not insignificant ten percent of the overall grade for the unit. Through this process, we felt students would both acquire skills for the delicate process of peer collaboration which is part of professional playscript development, and gain insights into the responsibility and power of the dramaturg in the script development process.

Strategy 5: Self Assessment and Reflective Journal

From peer assessment it was a short step to include a small degree of self assessment in the process as well - five out of the twenty marks allocated for the final draft script, with the other fifteen assessed by the official tutors. According to David Boud, 'self assessment involves students taking responsibility for monitoring and making judgements about aspects of their own learning.' (Boud 1991:1). Besides, it is essential that playwrights develop some skill on the objective assessment of the quality of their own work, given the range of well-intentioned but often conflicting feedback they are likely to receive from their collaborators.

To assist the students in developing this capacity for reflective practice, we made one of the assessment tasks the maintenance of an individual journal by each student - worth eighteen marks overall. Research by Wilson *et al.* has concluded that journals

encourage students to develop links between theory and practice, and to reflect upon their own attitudes, beliefs and the consequences of their actions. Reflection can lead students to become autonomous actors ... rather than passive acceptors of traditional culture and practice. In doing this, journals can play a significant part (Wilson 1995:174).

The journal was intended to be a chart of students' learning journey and to include: a set of reflections on each of the stages in the process, their relationship to that process and their feelings about it, as well as reflections on the relationship with their dramaturgical team-mate. Because of the latter, journals were to be confidential between the students and tutors - not shared with other students.

PHASE TWO - DELIVERY AND OUTCOMES

The unit was delivered to a group of twenty-three students (not as many as we had anticipated) in the second semester, 1997. Don Batchelor, as Unit Co-ordinator, was principal lecturer; Peter Copeman participated both as guest lecturer on two occasions and as tutor for one of the two tutorial groups. The other tutor was a postgraduate student, Talia Van Gils.

Research Approach

A range of methods was used to monitor student responses to the design and delivery of the unit:

- direct observation of the response to the Student Learning Contract;
- four short end-of-session questionnaires at regular intervals;
- an hour-long structured feedback session in Week 9;
- scrutiny of students' reflective journals-in-progress in Week 9;
- continuous tutor supervision of writer/dramaturg working processes with on-going discussion between the tutors the Unit Co-ordinator;
- regular, continuous assessment tasks which built on one another, with concomitant chances for the tutors to recognise and ameliorate problems which may be developing, and to read responses to the unit;
- a structured debriefing session involving the three staff and all students in the final week;
- formal QUT evaluation of the unit; and

- scrutiny of the students' completed reflective journals, providing a chance to evaluate the overall learning response of each individual student.

The Student Learning Contract

This involved a one-to-one meeting of about 15 minutes duration between each student and the Unit Co-ordinator throughout a very long day at the beginning of week 2 of the semester. Without exception, the students responded warmly to this opportunity and to the notion that it had a kind of professional equivalence to the initial negotiations between a writer and a producer. It caused a closer reading of the unit outline than usual; no students were unclear about what was being asked of them and a significant number showed a high degree of awareness that they were facing a challenging and demanding set of learning tasks. Nonetheless, not only did they all attend their allocated time and decide to continue with the unit, but only three out of the twenty-four set themselves a target grade of less than a distinction level. (There has been some subsequent generalised concern that marks along the way were not meeting their expectations, but it has never focused negatively on this early exercise at projection.)

In all cases the proforma supplied was readily signed as the basis of agreement; negotiation in all cases except one concerned itself with the choice of a dramaturgical partner and with the nature of the dramatic text being attempted. No-one wanted to write other than a stage-play. Just one reservation was expressed about being able to work within the apparently restrictive guidelines the student had seen in the Unit Handbook (for that student it remained an issue throughout). When asked in the interview to comment on the peer/self-marking elements in the assessment, the students universally expressed appreciation of this idea.

Questionnaires

Four questionnaires were administered by calling upon all students to complete them together, usually at the end of a session. This meant that those who had to hurry off might not oblige; but out of 24 (by mid-semester this had become 23 when one student withdrew for reasons unrelated to the unit) we got the following number of responses in order: 17, 20, 17 and 17. The responses to the questionnaires then formed the basis of open discussion in the class.

Questionnaire 1: The Lectures

The first questionnaire dealt with the general lectures introducing practical approaches to writing dramatic text. It asked whether these lectures were useful or not, why they were or were not useful, how they might be improved and also called for an open comment on the lectures.

Sixteen out of the seventeen found the lectures 'useful'; as to why, sample responses included:

- crucial points were made;
- they were relaxed and led in a direction rather than just presenting information;
- they gave many examples of how it has been done;
- there was lots of stuff to feed from based on deep sources of experience - inspirational;
- hearing different perspectives on the writing process.

Regarding improvements, some comments made were:

- the time slot [i.e. 5.00pm to 8.00pm] sent me to sleep;
- a lot of information to take in - more overheads would help;
- more examples of texts;
- more time for questions at the end;
- sometimes seemed a big gap from the lectures to the nuts and bolts of my 20 minute script;
- supply more handouts;
- references to film were appreciated - more of those please.

Open comments addressed the following:

- the 3 hour session, at night;
- concern at the wide range in student ages;
- a lack of punctuality on the part of some students;
- the value guest lectures from professional practitioners Margery Forde, (*Snapshots From Home*), Philip Dean, (*Long Gone Lonesome Cowgirls*), Chanel Maher (Now Writing Co-ordinator, Queensland Theatre Company) and Peter Copeman (*Hearts and Minds*) for:
 - the anecdotal 'colour' they supplied;
 - the insights they provided into making a living;
 - the range of working contexts and approaches they described;
 - the increased understanding about professional support and associations they contributed;
 - the potential they offered as future contacts/mentors/models;
 - the variant, even contending, views about approaching writing which they espoused;
 - the career development paths they described.

Questionnaire 2 - Approaches to Teaching and Learning

The second questionnaire asked for brief statements, two of which were to 'outline positive developments in your approach to, or understanding of, writing for performance that have resulted from undertaking this unit' and two of which were to outline 'concerns' about the same matters. These questions were administered in week 9 following two weeks in which there had been no formal classes and the students had been working on their first draft scripts.

Responses to the second questionnaire generally fell into four categories: the maintenance of the journal; the effectiveness of the peer dramaturgical process; issues of student confidence in themselves; and the highly structured nature of the assessment tasks (including the insistence on conventional narrative structure in the scripts).

The response to the requirement of keeping a reflective journal was not very positive at this stage. Sample comments include:

- I'm not sure what its value is;
- the amount of reflection required concerns me; and,
- sometimes I feel I am being made to think about my work too much.

Significantly in this regard, during the same session the journals were scanned by the tutors (this scrutiny had been signalled in the Unit Outline and Handbook, even though there was no marking associated with it at this stage). As it happened, the tutors felt that only about twenty per cent of the journals at this stage provided a 'thorough and comprehensive record of a personal journey' (a criterion from the Handbook) and few even of those reflected much on teaching and learning issues. Of the rest, roughly half just met the requirements of an exercise while the other half revealed only low level compliance. What limited reference was made to teaching and learning in the journals generally repeated what was said in responses to Questionnaire 2.

Responses to the process of peer dramaturgy were generally more positive, even at this stage, with six positive comments and three negative. Positives examples include:

- I have learnt to appreciate constructive criticism;
- I have come to depend on her; and,

- being critical of another person's work has helped me be critical of my own;

while all three negative comments were variations on the theme of:

- my dramaturg is holding me back.

With regard to the negative comments, it is noteworthy that most of these came from students who came to the Learning Contract meeting without a preferred partner in mind (mostly because they did not know other students enrolled in the unit). In such cases dramaturgical partnerships were assigned on a fairly arbitrary basis. Experience in delivering the unit indicated that these arbitrarily assigned partnerships were the ones most likely to run into difficulties.

Also on the negative side, reservations were expressed quite heatedly by a minority in one tutorial group about having to hand their plays over to their dramaturgs to facilitate (they used the word 'direct' which may be part of the problem) the reading at the Playfest. In principle they felt that they would know better than 'some outsider' what was intended by the playtext, and they resisted arguments both that playwrights have to learn to hand the show over and then to negotiate with the team which then brings it to life in production, and that not getting too mixed up in the logistics of the presentation allows the playwright to evaluate response to the script both from the performers and other collaborators, and from the audience.

On the question of confidence, in Questionnaire 2 there were two concerns expressed about the requirement of writing a 20 minute play that had also to be complete. They did not amount to rejections of the idea so much as doubts about being able to do it. The concern was also mentioned in class once or twice, and it was apparent from the reflections in the journals that about a third of the students spent most of the semester in a state of agitation about being able to measure up to the demands of writing something which was performable and presentable. It is not clear whether this concern was exacerbated by the awareness that their scripts were going to be read in front of peers and a sprinkling of invited guests at the Playfest. (Such self-doubts are, of course, endemic to the experience of even the most seasoned professional dramatists - indeed, of all artists in general.)

On the matter of the highly structured nature of the assessment tasks, opinion at this (roughly) half-way point was evenly divided (nine positive responses and eight negative). Typical positive comments are:

- following the guidelines has been very useful;
- I have the deadlines, the inspiration and the advice I need; and,
- writing to structure has helped my work;

while negative comments include:

- I feel disheartened by such a conventional, restricted style of writing;
- I don't like things like a 12 step program;
- the strict guidelines should be reviewed.

To monitor student feeling about this issue more closely, Questionnaire 3 - administered two weeks later as first drafts were being handed in - sought more detailed responses about each of the elements of the structure of the unit and about the prescriptive guidelines laid down in the Unit Handbook.

Questionnaire 3: Prescribed Structure

At this later stage, more than 70 per cent of respondents showed either a highly positive or positive disposition towards the Handbook as a whole and its step by step guidelines - especially towards having being required to prepare a Storyline and a Character Backstory. The rest found some value in each of these elements except for one student who said they were not much use.

One very gratifying response to this questionnaire was that 15 out of 17 respondents said the amount of 'self reliance' required by the unit was 'just right', while the remaining 2 said there was 'too much'. No-one said there was 'too little'.

Moreover, when asked at this stage about the extent to which their dramaturg had helped them, two ticked 'substantially' and ten ticked 'a fair amount', while only four ticked 'a little' and one ticked 'not much'.

Questionnaire 4: Playfest Readings

Questionnaire 4 dealt with the Playfest readings and was administered a week after the event. All respondents rated the experience as either very successful (5) or successful (12). All found the readings of other student plays either very informative (7) or informative (10), and the readings of their own plays either very informative (13) or informative (4). The discussion of other people's plays was rated either very interesting (5) or interesting (12), and of their own plays either very interesting (12) or interesting (5). Best features mentioned were:

- the constructive criticism from others;
- the range of work presented; and,
- hearing my own play come to life;

while worst features mentioned were primarily focused on logistics:

- the event was too long [2 groups of simultaneous readings with each play allotted 30 minutes for set-up, presentation and discussion - 8 hours with two 30-minute breaks];
- difficulties organising other students to make their contribution as readers;
- the short time from first draft to Playfest to second draft [this also arose as an issue in the journals and in verbal feedback]; and,
- the fact that some students drifted away after their own play was read and their direct commitments as dramaturgs or readers were complete.

Significantly in terms of the previous response to Questionnaire 3 regarding dramaturgical partners taking responsibility for the reading presentations, while four respondents to Questionnaire 4 felt that their dramaturg had not 'arranged a useful reading' of their play, neither in open comments on the questionnaire document nor in other verbal feedback did any student state that they would have preferred to organise the reading of their own play.

Formal QUT Student Evaluation of Unit

The QUT SEU consists of 10 fixed questions which 'serve a summative, management oriented and quality assurance function' and 10 optional questions, selected from sets of lists which are intended to serve the teacher's needs for 'formative, individual oriented and quality enhancement' information. Student responses to each question are on a 5 point scale where 5 = very good; 4 = good; 3 = satisfactory; 2 = poor; and 1 = very poor. For most of the 20 questions the average rating from the 15 respondents on this occasion was round 3.6 and for the overall rating of the unit it was 3.7. Best scores were:

- opportunity for reflection and valuable feedback (4.3);
- teaching and assessment are compatible with aims (4.0);
- structured & delivered in ways that help me understand (3.9);
- the staff have a friendly, helpful, professional manner (3.9);
- assessment methods and feedback helped my learning (3.9).

Lower scores were:

- the organisation of the unit supports my learning and needs (3.3);
- this unit has encouraged me to work as a productive team member (3.2);
- genuine attempts have been made to improve this unit (3.1); and
- there is a good balance between activities [lectures, prac. work, reading assignments etc.] (3.0).

Evaluation of Research Results

Student Learning Contracts

The overall impression from the Learning Contract meetings is that the students felt honoured by them, that they had taken them seriously, that they had come prepared, that they used the opportunity to question and clarify matters, that they readily signed up, and that they did so with an evident spirit of commitment.

Lectures

The early series of lectures appears successful in introducing the basic issues and contexts of performance writing - more negative comments were directed at organisational issues, or at the attitudes of fellow students, than at the content or delivery of the lectures themselves. The guest lectures seem to be particularly valuable in providing alternative views about and models for approaching writing, and anecdotes 'from the coal face'.

Such negative impressions as seemed to emanate from the lectures were mostly concerned with the amount of conceptual information students had to absorb in a relatively short time.

It would seem important to retain the lectures in the future, perhaps with some sharpening and/or clarification of the content, although the method of delivery of the foundational material could be streamlined to allow more time for other things.

Focus on Conventional Narrative Structure

The consensus among staff by the end of the semester - based on discussions with student groups and individuals, on the feedback students offered after the readings of their peers' scripts at the Playfest, and on the fact that only two students still mentioned the issue in any negative way towards the end of their journals - was that most students had experienced enough development during the unit not to want any longer to raise the structured approach as an issue. Even among those who had most resisted the narrative structural 'straightjacket' early in the unit, there had been a noticeable shift towards adopting the suggested structural elements by the second drafts of their plays. One of these latter students even acknowledged that the Handbook and its detailed exegesis of conventional structure had been a useful fallback at one point when he became 'blocked' during the writing of his first draft.

From general feedback and discussion during the last session, it would seem that some of the students' earlier resistance to the tight structural requirements might have come about because of the brief description of the unit in the QUT Handbook - even its very title of 'Writing for Performance' - which could have been read by incoming students as suggesting a less prescribed format. This might even, in part, explain why the very evident attempts to get useful, cogent feedback on the structure and delivery of the unit were not seen as attempts to 'improve' the unit. (This might also be explained by the likelihood that the students do not understand the process of 'improvement' itself. For example, even if we had wanted to it would have served no useful purpose, for instance, to relax the tight structure requirements in midstream. The structure of both the learning process as we had designed it, of our research, and of our contractual arrangements with the students via the SLCs, made it essential that we stick to the unit structure to the end in order to gain an holistic view of its outcomes, in order to improve the unit *the next time it is delivered*).

Some of the early resistance to the 'structured approach' might be disarmed by a slight change to one sentence in the QUT Handbook (name changes are out of the question until the next Academy review), as well as by a more careful and persuasive statement of the rationale for 'structuring' during early class sessions and in the Unit Handbook - including, perhaps, some evidence of the way students during this semester gradually embraced and felt benefit from an approach which they had initially judged as constricting.

Notwithstanding these conclusions, some accommodation might be made for a student who comes to the Learning Contract meeting with a cogent and convincing case for following approach to performance writing other than that prescribed in the Unit Handbook - for example, the desire for experience with some structure other than conventional dramatic narrative. In such a case, the student might be required to prepare a detailed contract outlining elements from the unit that would be engaged with and indicating alternative activities (different performance writing models to be studied, and so on) of equivalent value and assessable weight. This is especially worthy of consideration given the wide range of maturity and experience levels among the students enrolling in the combined unit - it would seem desirable to accommodate greater levels of theatre and/or writing experience with greater flexibility of approach.

Peer Dramaturgy

This appears to have been generally successful, other than those instances mentioned earlier where arbitrarily assigned partnerships broke down for reasons of incompatibility of experience, approach to learning and/or writing, or general worldview. The degree to which individual dramaturgical relationships were likely to be successful was manifested within the first two weeks of the semester, and depended upon the personalities involved - overall, in both formal and informal feedback the positive comments were most common. For a small minority of students, the incompatibility or slackness of particular partners were impediments; but this did not translate into any overt rejection of the whole idea of reciprocal dramaturgy. In final journals there were many glowing tributes to

dramaturg/partners and only a couple of disgruntled comments about particular people - one speaking enviously of the experience others had enjoyed.

However it is clear that greater emphasis needs to be put on the dramaturgical role in early sessions of the unit - especially in the partnering of students who express no preference in their SLC. We also need to encourage earlier attention to preparations for the Playfest readings, to highlight the importance of the written appraisals by the dramaturgs (perhaps by reconsidering the balance of marks that attach to the dramaturgical function), and to raise the profile of the dramaturg's role at the Playfest. This might also improve what the students seem to have identified as organisational inadequacies in the unit.

Playfest

Despite the nervousness the prospect of this public presentation engendered in some students, Questionnaire 4 together with comments in the open feedback sessions and the journals clearly indicate that for many this was a highlight of the unit.

Regarding the perceived lack of preparation time for it, the allocation of time towards the end of the unit clearly needs some consideration. The end of semester is a crowded time, however, and we have some concern that if time is opened up by this unit students may be drawn into reallocating it to pressing assignment and exam preparations for other units. There are also some benefits in the 'hot-housing' effects of compressed deadlines.

With respect to the spoken complaints that some students were only interested in the responses to their own work, the questionnaire actually reveals a healthy appreciation of hearing other students' work and having the chance to comment on it and indeed some irritation that they could not hear more of it (though it was something of a marathon and the merits of alternative procedures of presentation will need to be weighed up).

The small attendance by non-participants may be partly explained by the students' own apprehension - and therefore reluctance to encourage friends and family to attend - before the event. Pre-Playfest attempts to encourage them to invite such people had fallen on deaf ears, and in any case general audiences for such relatively low-profile occasions are not easy to attract in the Academy at any time. It is unlikely that this situation will change much in future; but that the complaints were made is evidence of some after-the-event confidence that the Playfest had something to show that was worth seeing.

Reflective Journal

When the journals were marked at the end of semester, there were isolated suggestions in passing about improvements that might be made to the unit, but little attempt to critique the teaching and learning in any concerted - or even haphazard - way. Mostly the reflections were on the students' own engagements with their writing or dramaturgical process. Even in this area, only a couple were richly insightful; most were merely conscientious records, and a few still had not appeared at the time this article was being finalised.

It is possible - perhaps even likely - that the reflective process we expected to find in the journals was in fact manifested in the responses to the research questionnaires and the other feedback processes we had built into the unit - with the journals seen by students as duplicating these processes and therefore not a high priority. Considerable commitment was already generally evident, so the journals seemed to be treated as a necessary but not very engaging chore.

Considering the relatively high workload just in the writing and dramaturgical tasks, the expressed need for more creative space in the unit, and the relatively low value of the journals even for our research, it would seem that they might easily be dispensed with in future, especially if other reflective feedback processes remain built in, as is our intention.

Conclusions

We feel we can safely conclude that most of the innovations made in the reconceptualising of the unit - the Student Learning Contracts, the focus on narrative, the highly structured step-by-step process, and the use of peer dramaturgy - have been 'the wright stuff', generally successful in helping to deliver to the students a satisfying, useful learning experience, and bearing out the literature in terms of their beneficial effects on the enhancement of independent student learning. The one possible major exception is the requirement to keep a reflective journal, although there is clearly room for fine tuning of all of the processes.

Our research also suggests that those elements of the previous unit retained in the current structure - notably the varied lectures (including guests) and the Playfest readings - are strong and popular elements worthy of their retention.

There is also clearly a need to achieve a better balance between activities across the semester. This would seem to involve reorganising the early weeks, in particular condensing the delivery of general foundational information delivered in the lecture - possibly by including it in the Unit Handbook or putting it on-line - so that the drafting, feedback, Playfest and re-drafting procedures towards the end of semester are given more creative and reflective room. In doing this, care must be taken that students do not simply then devote the time so provided to other competing units at a point when there are many assignments and exam demands. One way of taking some of the pressure off could be to remove the obligation to keep a journal; if this is not done, more attention could be given to briefing the students about what to include in it and to monitoring their efforts along the way.

With the relatively minor adjustments described here, we will deliver the unit and evaluate it in similar vein in Semester 2, 1998.

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