

Edith Cowan University

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Community Writing as a Focus in the Bachelor of Arts in Writing at Edith Cowan University

In the late 1970s the former Mount Lawley College of Advanced Education took its first steps towards diversifying from its hitherto total commitment to educating teachers. As one of the Assistant Directors of the College at that time, I was allocated the task of establishing a School of General Studies. One of the first courses which I helped to set up within this School of General Studies was the 'Associate Diploma in Applied Arts and Sciences'. At the time, I had recently been sent on a whirlwind series of visits to CAEs in most of the other Australia states to find out what kind of diversification of courses was taking place elsewhere. Naturally, I found that my colleagues in English Departments of these other colleges and institutes were particularly helpful when it came to conceiving the 'arts' part of the proposed associate diploma at Mount Lawley.

One core first year unit in the Mt Lawley diploma course was soon conceived as the obvious basis for developing students' communicative and creative skills. It would be team taught by enthusiastic innovators from within the respective departments of visual art, music, drama and English. For some reason, possibly the success of writing workshops held at recreational camps (which our new students were able to share with traditional teacher education students), there emerged a particular interest in printing up collections of student creative writing and also holding readings of some of this student work.

The students who enrolled in our Associate Diploma in Applied Arts and Sciences were a mixed bag of school-leavers and the more mature-aged, many of whom saw themselves as 'second chance' tertiary students. One was even the Public Works architect of the college who had recently gone into retirement. I only tell this part of the story because something of this discovered thirst for creative work seems to have stubbornly persisted these twenty years to become Edith Cowan University's Bachelor of Arts (Writing) which has already begun enrolling students for its commencement in 1998.

Some twelve years ago, however, following the amalgamation of five small CAE's into the Western Australian College of Advanced Education, the real foundations of the BA (Writing) were laid down. The WACAE's planners, in their unwisdom - or just plain carelessness - had forgotten to include a Department of English. When some amongst us pointed out that the national language maybe deserved a place in their giddy dreams of Future Shock there was rapid rectification and I found myself to be one of the two members of that department. We immediately began planning an Associate Diploma in Arts (all we were permitted to aspire to at first) and I insisted on providing for a writing stream. I drew up four units.

Language and Writing - a basic first year written expression unit with scope for experiment in creative writing, but also providing some background in the origins and particular features of English as a world language. This course had to satisfy requirements for teacher education students needing to sharpen literacy skills. They also had to think a little about how some of the basic skills of written expression might be passed on to their own future students in schools. So far this was only what was being done all over Australia, no doubt, in all the brand new CAEs which were sprouting like a vigorous growth of acne in response to the policy hormones of the Canberra-based educational planners.

Authorship and Publication - was conceived as a follow-up unit at second year level for those not chosen by the gods to emulate Mr McChoakumchild in the nation's schools. Our students would be 'real' potential writers, happy amateurs or even professionals-to-be. Because of my active participation in practically every writers' organisation in Western Australia, bar the Society of Women Writers, I was well aware of the then immense ignorance, on the part of School-based writing programs, as to the world of professional writing. In the *Authorship and Publication* unit we sought to establish some awareness of the implications of copyright, contracts, editing and proof-reading, across as wide as possible a range of non-fiction, fiction, (including writing for children) poetry and playwriting. At the time there was a tacit agreement that the areas of journalism and scriptwriting were the preserve of the WA Institute of Technology which was the first full tertiary teaching institution in the State (and, it was argued by Brian Dibble at the AAWP's inaugural conference last year, the first in Australia) to offer a writing stream in a bachelor's degree. In the Mount Lawley *Authorship and Publication* unit in 1986 we introduced students to research practices common to the world of professional writing. Students were expected to self-publish a monograph-length collection of work in multiple copies by the end of the unit. All course tutors were to be recognised practising writers.

Community Writing - the other one of the two second-year units is to me the most interesting and probably the rarest in tertiary writing courses of all the units established in 1986 and now in the new BA (Writing), since, like those mentioned already, it has existed and evolved these ten years past and is proving more popular than ever. As the attached unit outline reveals, *Community Writing* was designed to offer students some of the more basic know-how which a community might expect of its practising writers: for example, sources of advice on writers organisations, writers centres, publishers, manuscript assessment, literary competitions, performance venues, research facilities, writers' agents, funding and grants and many more. Additionally, the unit sought to ensure that successful students could turn their hands to any of the usual tasks expected of writers in a local community: organising competitions, readings, workshops, book launches, writers' tours, writing newsletters, promoting of events, reviewing, making grant applications, starting a writers' circle, editing an anthology, producing basic local history and biography, and so forth. I will return to this unit shortly.

Technical and Commercial Writing - originally conceived as a specialised third-year unit for those who intended to work in the profitable area of manuals, handbooks, instruction books, internal staff positions, etc, this unit unfortunately was archived before it was ever to admit students. What happened was that my fellow member of the English Department who had intended to teach it suffered a fatal heart attack. A related first-year unit entitled *Business and Commercial Writing* was successful and still exists under other names. Because it was one of the founding units in our successful BA in Public Relations, also established by me in the English Department, this first-year version evolved quickly to one which concentrated on the writing of speeches, press releases, newsletters etc. Public Relations, as an area of the English Department, has now passed on to professional public relations teaching staff who have helped us to create a more specialised unit call *Public Relations Writing*.

The third stage in the saga came in 1988 when the WACAE was at last emboldened to offer a Bachelor of Arts degree. Within this degree a six-unit Minor in Writing was included, made possible by the transfer of the Media Studies Department from the Faculty of Science and Technology to our Arts Faculty. This brought units in *Writing for the Media*, *Journalism I, II, and III* and *Scriptwriting I, II and III*. An inherited teacher education unit, which had always been called *Creative Writing*, and an *Independent Study Unit* provided other third year elements for this Minor in Writing.

The increasing popularity of this Minor eventually made our argument for a Writing Major strong enough to prevail within the sceptical academic boards (whose approval was grudging, to say the least). Fortunately, the pioneering of Curtin University, especially in its former guise of the WA Institute of Technology, and the widespread mushrooming of undergraduate writing courses throughout Australia were significant factors which helped to win our case. The appointment of Professor Andrew Taylor to the English Department in 1992 was a critical factor, since it was his distinguished writing career which played a not insignificant part in his selection for the Chair. Indeed, his rapid progress in assisting the establishment of a strong postgraduate sector for the English Department eventually revealed that a number of MA students were interested in and capable of presenting a creative writing project as an alternative to the traditional literary thesis. Therefore it was all the more appropriate to provide such students with choice of an adequate undergraduate preparation in Writing as compared to the existing English Major with its focus in Literary Theory and Criticism.

Now, I realise that this narrative has no particular uniqueness in its generality, since all over Australia such programs have, of course, led us to the founding of the Australian Association of Writing Programs (to use its current terminology). However, from my position in the physically most isolated capital city on Earth, I do have a desire to speak of a couple of features of the BA (Writing) in its Edith Cowan guise and then to conclude with an explanation as to why I have come to believe that that the unit we call *Community Writing* has turned out, almost by accident, to be a vital component of this course.

When we were attempting for the umpteenth time to satisfy our Faculty colleagues that there was a place for the BA (Writing) in the Faculty's future, the English Department finally decided to completely modernise its introductory first year units in literary studies.

Unfortunately we hadn't access to such articles as Paul Dawson's recent, 'The Function of Critical Theory in Tertiary Creative Writing Programmes' (*Southern Review* 1997). Nevertheless, in an instinctive sort of way we thought that making the first year core units, *Literature Language and Textuality* and *Literature, Discourse and Society* a compulsory element in the writing degree at least would bring the Writing students into dialogue with the English major students so that contemporary literary theory would become a context for their writing practice. Likewise the English Literature majors would be less removed from dialogic engagement with the creating of text. Who knows, but literary theory itself might suffer some process of adaptation! That is a story yet to unfold, but according to Dawson's very interesting article it would certainly work against the common assumption he criticises:

Perhaps the largest impediment to recognising the existence and value of literary theory in writing programs is the assumption that 'Creative writing' is a practice which exists in the public sphere and has somehow been annexed by the academy. (Dawson 72)

In fact, in the Edith Cowan third year unit, *Creative Writing*, we have introduced practices which are supported by Dawson's arguments for 'an integration of Creative Writing and Literary Studies.' (77). In this unit the first task is for students to compile a 'critical collection' of an Australian writer who comes close to being a role model in each student's favourite *genre*. If the writer is a contemporary Western Australian, students are encouraged to interview the author and include the edited transcript in their appendices. In some ways the procedure is a form of mentoring. Students follow-up with preparing manuscripts of their own and submitting them to publishers. What I am thinking to further develop in this unit is a re-interrogation of theoretical issues introduced in the two first year units, *Literature, Language and Textuality* and *Literature, Discourse and Society*. As Dawson has argued,

the writer is that student who has internalised a set of theoretical principles thus organising a response according to the same critical strategies adopted to identify exemplary texts. (76)

A word on the *Independent Study Unit*. A similar unit is available within the Media Studies Department for writing students whose focus is media writing. The English Department unit caters for poets, dramatists, fiction and non-fiction writers. In the latter category we usually have writers specialising in local history, biography, travel writing, reviewing, public relations, etc. The way students operate in this unit is that they first propose a project in a formalised framework. These proposals are tabled at the first meeting of the students enrolled in this unit. At this same meeting each student also presents a research topic which will contribute in some way to the major project. This major project for *Independent Study* must be a completed manuscript suitable within the parameters of its *genre* for submission to a major literary competition, or to an appropriate publisher. In the case of longer works of prose fiction the manuscript would take the acceptable form of two or more chapters and a plot summary. Performance works are submitted to production companies or to funding authorities, festival planners and the like. Five thousand words or an equivalent number of lines of poetry or running time for a theatrical performance are the final requirement in such cases. Students spend up to one third of semester on 'research' which, as in the case of poetry projects, may entail a thematic study or field-work of considerable detail.

Following their research report, which is again shared with the others in the unit, students then submit a 'substantial portion' of the final manuscript for assessment and detailed editing. The editing is intended to make clear to student writers the degree of final editing the remainder of their manuscripts will require. There is another meeting of students at this point to share readings from their work in progression.

It only remains for the final manuscripts to be submitted back accompanied by proof of their parallel submission to publishers or competitions. This final submission constitutes 60% of the total mark for the unit. Some students have self published but must convince us that they are undertaking a serious commercial venture of this type. It seems an appropriate finale to the BA in Writing.

Now I want to return to the *Community Writing* unit. My argument is that *Community Writing* has emerged, somewhat surprisingly, as an integral part of this twelve-unit major. The objectives of this unit were developed out of our intention to provide creative writing students with survival skills in the operational world of writing, publishing and networking outside of academia. In Dawson's words,

a working knowledge of the machinations of the publishing industry, of grant systems, current trends and issues in Literature and the organising reception of the Media is required. (79)

What we did, then, was to get students to select an area of writing activity typically operating in the community, such as illustration of books, publishing of a newsletter, running a writers' centre, organising a public reading program, conducting writers' tours of schools, setting up a writers' reading, publishing a local magazine, and so on. They produce a research report for the rest of the students as Stage One of their project. In the second half of semester each student then engages in work experience or a sort of internship, depending on the nature of the selected topic. Then they submit their final reports on this experience.

But what has happened to their own writing development during this time? Part of the course requirement is to submit a body of work for the class anthology. Students who have researched compilation of anthologies find themselves with a rather large editing and production job, the 'application' of their knowledge serving their fellow writing students.

All this, in the *Community Writing* unit, is a useful antidote, perhaps, for the concentration on individual writing and literary theory in other units of the BA (Writing). And in some ways it links back to that first writing unit in the original Associate Diploma in Applied Arts and Sciences nearly two decades ago, *Creative Arts 101*, where writing was a central part of an interdisciplinary unit which broke away from conventional tertiary study.

It will be interesting to review the BA (Writing) after a year or two of its operation.

Reference

Dawson, Paul 'The Function of Critical Theory in Tertiary Creative Writing Programmes' *Southern Review* (January 1997). Return to text

Appendix

Community Writing (Unit Outline), Edith Cowan University, 1997.

EDITH COWAN UNIVERSITY
FACULTY OF ARTS
SCHOOL OF LANGUAGE, LITERATURE AND MEDIA STUDIES
Department of English

TITLE OF UNIT: ENG2112 COMMUNITY WRITING
PRE-REQUISITE Completion of either

ENG1102 Language and Writing OR
MST1147 Writing for the Media

STATUS: BA (English/Media Studies), Second Year, Writing Minor, Elective
HOURS/WEEK: 3

DESCRIPTION:

This unit deals with the preparation, writing and editing of publications in a wide range of areas such as media releases, anthologies and community newsletters. It also gives writers a range of expertise to act as resource persons to others by undertaking such functions as the organisation of writing groups and advice on marketing of writing.

OBJECTIVES:

On completion of the unit students should be able to :

- 1 research, write and edit basic community publications such as newsletters, anthologies, local history monographs, media releases;
- 2 produce a collection of their own writing in any of the recognised prose and poetry genres;
- 3 organise public writing events such as the following: public readings, writers' circle, writing competition, book launch, Writer-in-the-Community;
- 4 make arts grant applications as an individual or on behalf of an organisation of writers, or local community group;
- 5 participate in the on-going activities of a Writers' Centre as a resource person for other writers.

UNIT CONTENT:

- 1 The writing of business letters, reports, funding and other submissions, media releases, simple community advertisements, local history articles, biographies, etc.,
- 2 Research for writing, including observation, interviewing, archival and library searches, opinion surveys, market appraisal and field experience (eg with publishing houses, writers' centres and other community organisations).
- 3 Practical activities in basic publishing (including the part played by graphic designers and illustrators), together with actual experience of designing and pasting-up simple monograph publications.
- 4 Essentials of self management necessary for a free-lance community author (e.g. finance, contracts, copyright, legal matters).
- 5 Personal development workshops in the general fields of creative writing, viz: prose, fiction, poetry and drama/media scripts, including essentials of oral presentation of stories or verse.

TEACHING AND LEARNING PROCESSES:

This will involve seminars and workshops with an emphasis on practice; there are also field experience assignments and a practicum component.

ASSESSMENT:

Community Writing File and Research Project 40%

Anthology or Folio of Personal Writing 40%

Examination 20%

100%

TEXTS:

Australian Government (1978). *Style manual for authors, editors and printers* 3rd ed. Canberra: Australian Government Publishing Service.

Dingli, R. (1995). *WA writers handbook*. Fremantle: State Literature Office.

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Delbridge, A. (Ed.) (1981). *The Macquarie dictionary*. Sydney: Macquarie Library.

Disher, G. (1983). *Writing fiction*. Melbourne: Penguin.

Gavin, M. (1973). *Writing short stories for pleasure and profit*. Boston: The Writer.

Gilbert, A. (1983). *Clear writing*. New York: Wiley.

Golvan, C. (1989). *Words and the law*. Ringwood: Penguin.

Grenville, K. (1990). *The writing book: A workbook for fiction writing*. Sydney: Allen & Unwin.

Rainer, T. (1980). *The new diary*. Sydney: Angus & Robertson.

Reed, K. (1989). *Revision*. Cincinnati: Writer's Digest Books.

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Vol 2 No 1 April 1998

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