



Higher Education Research and Development Society of Australasia, Inc

The Student Experience

Proceedings of the

32nd HERDSA Annual Conference

6-9 July 2009

Darwin, Australia

Tait, C. & Fountain, W. (2009) Exploring the concept of the teacher-as-designer in online creative writing pedagogy, in *The Student Experience, Proceedings of the 32nd HERDSA Annual Conference, Darwin, 6-9 July 2009: pp 416-423.*

Published 2009 by the
Higher Education Research and Development Society of Australasia, Inc
PO Box 27, Milperra, NSW 2214, Australia
www.herdsa.org.au

ISSN: 0155 6223
ISBN: 0 908557 78 7

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Exploring the concept of the teacher-as-designer in online creative writing pedagogy

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Creative writing is particularly well suited to the online teaching and learning environment. There is an emphasis on the creation of text, reading of text and the participation in critique and deconstruction of text; all of which can be easily shared and the learning supported online. The relationship between creative writing academics and their students is one which clearly puts both parties on a similar footing: both are creative text makers. Supporting the creative writing academic to understand how to design an online environment specific to both themselves and their students is a way to investigate and develop the larger pattern of a professional development approach that is designed to enable academics to learn how to design and teach in online learning environments, in a way that best suits their particular context.

Keywords: design pattern language, creative writing, academic development, online environment

Overarching context

It is now likely that most courses or subjects in higher education will utilize a type of LMS technology, and there is significant growth in research and resources which offer advice and suggestions for making the best use of these environments (eg Laurillard, 1993, 2002; Salmon, 2000, 2002; Vrasidas & Glass, 2005). Academics of all disciplines need to make sense of and integrate the elearning environment into their teaching and learning. The solution Peter Goodyear suggests, is to develop a way to share a concept, a situation, and a solution method through the language, 'contextuability' and structure of design patterns (Goodyear, 2005).

Though there is a long history of creative writing in the academy, many of those working in the field today are struggling to conceptualise their discipline specific pedagogy (Blythe and Sweet, 2008), as well as to find a comfortable space in the traditional concept of research (Lin, 2003).

A pattern language, as described in the work of Goodyear and the members of the e-LEN project (e-LEN, 2004), offers a method of supporting a creative writing teacher/academic to become a teacher-as- designer in an online creative writing course. The patterns described can be considered organic textual explanations of examples of pedagogical interactions, designed to meet specific educational purposes. Such patterns, once created, are emergent, in that they are co-created by teaching academics and passed along as examples of pedagogical methods,

but they are also modifiable and contestable thus can be regularly re-developed based upon experience and research. There is potential for these pedagogical patterns to be ‘owned’ by the authors, in perhaps the way a wiki is developed and ‘owned’, and yet still shared and further developed by future contributors.

Design pattern language (DPL) and pedagogy

Alexandrian Design Pattern Language

The concept of design pattern language was developed by Christopher Alexander as a method for considering elements and interactions in town planning and architecture (Alexander, 1979; Alexander et al., 1977). The key idea was that there were recognisable patterns in the purpose and intent of both buildings and places and that ‘towns’, as a place where people lived were made up of a variety of considered spaces, both built and natural, in which people lived, worked and interacted. It is Alexander’s contention that these ‘places’ can be conceptualised, described and shared through the use of a pattern language which enables people who will use the spaces to be able to discuss their desires and needs with architects, designers, town planners and builders of such spaces. The designs described in the pattern language offer a myriad of possible connections and interactions with other different designs, and each pattern is slightly altered in form and developed as it is connected with other patterns.

Thus a design is conceptualised by intent for a particular purpose, to meet the particular needs of the users, and that this pattern interacts with other patterns, as well as interacting with the external natural environment supporting a ‘timeless way of building’ (Alexander, 1979). This design suits its purpose, meets the needs of the inhabitants and values and recognizes the interactions which exist between different elements of a pattern. It is both an organic and specifically contextual method of allowing for the structure of design and communication between the stakeholders with the process centred on the client/users.

Adapting the principles of design in architecture to learning and teaching

The concept of a language for design is particularly attractive in an educational context as it can serve as a platform of ‘plain language’ for academics of different disciplines to participate in the discourse of learning and teaching. While we work within our own discipline, one of the key skills of those in academic development is that we articulate our work across the disciplines of others. Research is contextual within a discipline, key content and concepts are particularly specific, but teaching and learning methods are shared, modified and adapted across all of the disciplines in higher education, and thus to support academics to further develop their pedagogical, curriculum and assessment methods we need to develop a way of talking about teaching and learning that accommodates and adapts to the contexts specified by those academics and the students who inhabit that discipline.

Design pattern language, as elaborated by (Goodyear, 2004, 2005; Goodyear, de Laat, & Lally, 2006; Goodyear & Ellis, 2007) and the members of the e-LEN team (e-LEN, 2004) offers a way of utilising a framework (a pattern of problem, analysis, solution, known uses, and references) in which simple language is used to describe an educational design. This educational design pattern language (EDPL) is particularly conceptualised in an elearning context, though in theory if one can use EDPL for online pedagogy and design then it is as applicable in other modes of interaction between learners and teachers and learning resources and activities.

Why online for creative writing?

Creative writing pedagogy is centrally concerned with developing the student's ability to create work that is considered, researched and unique. Like all pedagogy it is focussed on the interaction between the teacher and the learner, as well as on what resources the teacher will bring into the designed teaching and learning environment. Where and how will the teacher, the learner and the resources connect? What are the key issues of context and content? How will the learner begin to grapple with the ideas, concepts, skills and knowledges that the teacher/writer/academic believes are most important in this particular sphere? How will the learner construct their own understandings and skills and be able to demonstrate them? (Biggs & Moore, 1993)

Creative writing is a discipline in which it is essential to write, and re-write, to read and to critique, to focus on the structure, meaning and metaphor of language. Since the creation of text is the essential product of the process, creative writing seems particularly well suited to the online environment. Writing is an essentially individual activity, but creative writing also requires audience. The product itself, the words on the page or screen, is what connects the two parties of creative writing. Nevertheless, there are skills to be developed, concepts to learn and resources to be utilised, all of these, including developing a community of supportive individuals, can be created and offered in the online environment.

The online environment adds in an element of distance to the teaching and learning context that is a natural part of the production and consumption of text. Most creative works are written by individuals, and then consumed by other individuals, each in their separate time and space locations. Yet the reader and writer are connected, through the text. Stephen King calls this phenomenon 'time travel', in that incredibly two strangers can somehow meet and connect in their respective imaginations and the words created at one time become a world for the reader at another. (King, 2000)

In a face-to-face teaching context the respective roles of 'teacher' and 'student' are foregrounded. The face-to-face physical environment of most higher education institutions, are bent toward privileging the teacher. The lecture hall is the most obvious example of this, where the physical structures support the relationship of one to many, thus privileging the one. This is not to suggest there is not a place for expertise, nor for lectures, nor for a large group coming together to participate in a learning and teaching event to focus on the knowledge and hopefully wisdom of a master who has much to teach. However, in creative writing, the key outcome is for the student to learn how to be a writer. To do this, they must be a producer of text, gaining entry into the world of the master. The student must produce text and they need to develop a sense of agency which will enable them to value their own writing, work to improve it, seek advice and constructive criticism, and be prepared to submit that work for evaluation and assessment, and then to redevelop the writing again.

What a creative writing academic is seeking to do is to develop the judgement ability of the student, to develop their resiliency, and their agency to seek solutions and persevere in their writing, until the words on the page or screen are as accurate a representation of what they have imagined as can be. There is a natural predilection on behalf of creative writing students to see the teacher/writer/academics as an oracle on writing and the mysteries which make some combination of words work better than others, and thus to value the teacher/writer/academics views over their own. A face to face meeting makes this relationship biased toward the views of the master. An online space can offer the students the support of a

designed environment in which to learn about creative writing, and to develop their own judgement as to what is working in their words, without an over-reliance upon the views and judgement of the teacher/writer/academic. In the online world, the words on the page are foregrounded, the product of creative writing, instead of the author of the words. Words are at the heart of creative writing.

Educational design pattern language (EDPL) and academic development

Pattern design language offers the opportunity to support all academics working in the online environment to share successful pedagogy, as applied in a variety of circumstances. It enables the teachers to creatively choose and apply pedagogical possibilities that will best suit their circumstances, and in this way to support the creation of successful learning outcomes for their students.

It is Goodyear and Ellis' suggestion that 'design time' is the key point of leverage for the development of effective learning. Having the teacher/academic learn to work as a teacher-as-designer, designing and consequently creating a suitable environment, made up of places, resources and people for the learner to engage with, is a way in which teacher/academics can have the most positive impact upon the learning of their students, while taking into key consideration, the teacher/academic themselves (Goodyear & Ellis, 2007). A designed networked learning environment enables the teacher-designer to create a space in which they feel comfortable and are able to interact with their students, and in which students can take responsibility for their own learning. It is for the teacher/writer/academic to design an environment and to offer their expertise and knowledge as a resource within that designed environment, and for the learner to develop their sense of agency as both a learner and as a writer, to learn in and with and from the other students, the academic and the environment in which they are operating.

Sharing the concept of the pattern is a way to support the creative writing teacher to create a pedagogical environment that is specific to their approach to the discipline. There are a number of such pedagogical approaches including the one-on-one formative consultation, sharing of creative writing exercises, evaluation of text of published work and the critique workshop. A critique workshop event is where students read the work of other students and offer a critique of the work directly in a tutorial session. Everyone hears the comments of the other students, and the person whose work is under review is required to sit and listen to the comments and criticism without response until it is their turn at the end of the session.

One of the key difficulties with this type of pedagogy is the confrontational nature that is inherent in a group of people with the power to make critical comment upon the work of one with the added dynamic of the teacher/writer/academic being a member of the circle. Developing the ability to make positive critique of another's work is a key skill in creative writing for this is part of the deconstructive process that will enable the writer to see ways in which to improve their creative work. Yet, the face to face situation is fraught with social challenges. It is hard to face someone who is criticising your work, and when the dynamic is such that it is one person in the spotlight with other student/critics hidden in the mass of the group there is a tendency for judgemental comments which are not helpful to the student whose work is presented.

The development of considered analysis of creative work is a key part of comprehending how the words combined as they are, and work the magic that they do. The best creative writing

pedagogy supports students to develop these skills in a safe way as they learn how language works and how it can be manipulated for their specific purpose. What the online environment offers is a wider distance between the reader/critic and the writer/creator. It does not negate the importance of offering purposeful activities whereby students can develop ways of offering positive criticism that can support the learning of their fellow writers and thus in turn their ability to apply such positive critique to their own work, but it does help to ameliorate the power context of the pedagogy. It helps all in the situation to see the text as the object of scrutiny rather than the person, which is not possible when sitting in a room with the group and being the focus of their comments. In most cases, an online workshop critique circle will not be synchronous, and thus there is a space and time distance offered to the student/writers both the one under scrutiny and the ones who are offering the comment. An example of an EDPL for online creative writing pedagogy is included below.

Online Group Critique Workshop Circle

A creative writing workshop pattern is mainly concerned with the establishment of a group organisational form to support the process of critique and sharing of creative written work. It can be used as to part of these teaching and learning patterns:

- **LEARNING THROUGH ONLINE DISCUSSION**
 - **COLLABORATIVE LEARNING**
 - **NETWORKED LEARNING**
- **PERSONAL CRITICAL REFLECTIVE PRACTICES**
 - **CRITIQUING INTERACTIONS**
 - **COMMUNITY OF PRACTICE**



Writing workshop circles are one of the ways of organising the development and support of creative writing in a networked learning environment. Customising the interactions to the group as well as the degree of structure are the key determinants of the success of the circle to support learning in the participants.

The sharing of creative work is at the heart of a writing workshop circle, as is the giving and receiving of critique feedback. Workshop circles can be highly structured or unstructured. It is likely that in the beginning of the formation of a group a writer/teacher will establish firm rules which are closely monitored so that there is a fair distribution of space for each participant to contribute, as well as to ensure positive support for the person being critiqued to 'listen' to what is offered by the other students. There are often also specific rules for the way in which participants give critique so that it is constructive and specific. In time the teacher will not be required to 'police' the established rules as the members of the group establish a rhythm of their own.

The structure and organisation of a critique workshop circle should increase the likelihood that:

- a. All members participate in critique including the person whose work is under examination.
- b. All members have work critiqued.
- c. The writer who has submitted their work comes away with an understanding of the key issues identified by other participants and also of a way in which they might improve their work.
- d. The critiquing writers read and learn from the critique offered by others in the group and can thus utilise the session to improve their own writing.
- e. All of the members learn about the way in which writing, reading and critiquing are linked.

Unstructured and disorganised critique workshop circles run the risk of (for example):

- a. Overly personal and critical feedback that is damaging to the writer, their writing and their sense of agency as a writer
- b. Allowing for a destructive environment in which neither the writer nor other members feel safe

- to contribute
- c. Poor or limited learning about what and how a writer might improve (Blythe and Sweet, 2008).

Therefore:

1. **Establish the guidelines for the online circle upfront.**
2. **Support the participants to develop their ability to critique work through the learning activities in advance of the participation in this activity.**
3. **Intervene where necessary when a critique is particularly personal and not focussed on the text.**
4. **Keep the total size of the group manageable, perhaps no more than 15.**
5. **Establish guidelines for the length of work to be critiqued and the length of the critique.**
6. **The person whose work is under consideration will critique their own work first thus setting the tone and direction for the critical feedback to be offered by the rest of the group**
7. **The facilitator/teacher will then set the tone for the way in which critiquing will occur through his/her critique.**
8. **Once all members of the group have written and posted their critical responses to the work, then the facilitator will offer a brief summary of the critical responses offered.**
9. **The person whose work is under consideration will then post their understanding of what and how they are going to work to improve the creative piece before it is next presented to the group.**
10. **When the work is re-presented the person will first post a brief description of what they have done and why based upon the feedback offered in the previous iteration to act as guidance for the critical feedback offered in that iteration.**



Other patterns needed to complete this pattern:

- SUPPORTING AND DEVELOPMENT OF TRUST BETWEEN PARTICIPANTS
 - LEARNING THROUGH FEEDBACK
 - LEARNING THROUGH CRITIQUE
 - FACILITATING
 - DISCURSIVE TASKS
 - WORKSHOP ROLES
- ONLINE INDIVIDUAL CRITICAL EVALUATION OF WRITING ACTIVITIES

Figure 1: Example of Online Critiquing Workshop Design Pattern

Applying educational design pattern language to online creative writing pedagogy and academic development

Creative writing pedagogy is of itself a problematic area. Creative writing teacher/ academics often sit in an uneasy place within the scholarship of an institution of higher education (Lin, 2003). The challenge for a number of the academics working in this area is that production of published creative writing works is what brought them to academe, but teaching, research and service is what the academy requires of them.

The key challenge for creative writing academics is to maintain the delicate balance of continuing to be successful published creative authors, as well as teach into the creative writing programs, and then to participate in acceptable forms of research. Lin in her historical consideration of the evolution of such creative writing programs considers the problem faced to be "What after all, *is* the discipline of creative writing? (Lin, 2003) Nevertheless, she also

makes significant note of the long history that creative writing programs have had in universities.

One of the ways in which a discipline defines itself is in its pedagogy. Creative writing pedagogy is specific and particularly suited to the online environment. Supporting an academic to work as a teacher-as-designer in this environment will contribute to a closer understanding of the context-specific pedagogy while allowing the essential creativity that is evident in the work of creative writing students and their teachers. The understanding of design patterns that will be customised by the specific academic will also support the development of linking this discipline into the design patterns of pedagogy in other areas of the academy.

Applying pattern design language through focussing on the teacher-as-designer offers a flexible method of creating an environment which can situate the teacher in a key position, while still allowing and enabling learners to find a path for themselves into learning activities and consequently to learning outcomes. Each teacher/writer can create a designed space which reflects their knowledge, attitude and skills in both pedagogy and content, as well as their concept of how their students will learn the specific discipline of creative writing.

It is the intention of the author to work with creative writing academics who work within two different LMS's (Moodle and Blackboard) to support them to develop their teacher-as-designer skills, the educational design of the online environments and also the creation of design patterns.

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