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## RESEARCH

# Living Archives – Supporting Creative Practice Students Learning Leaps in Interdisciplinary Workshops

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Understanding students' creative process in order to identify meaningful ways to nurture, support and develop creative-practice students and enhance teaching and learning is a major challenge within Higher Education (HE). This paper evaluates a project that studied creative writing and visual-practice students' experiences of specific creative workshops at the University of Brighton. By providing opportunities for students to identify the things within their experiences, memories and even within themselves that inspire their creativity, the study found that it was possible to effectively support and enhance their creative processes. We suggest that the principles of this project can be applied to interdisciplinary academic work and help us to make links between teaching, learning and research. The paper identifies and explores opportunities for interdisciplinary teaching events and collaborative research and considers the potential impact on the authors own practices. We suggest that opportunities for interdisciplinary work and this process of learning through doing have implications for how we design and implement Creative Writing teaching and also on how we manage and carry out our research.

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**Keywords:** creative writing; pedagogy; students

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## Introduction

In unpredictable times, innovation will be the lifeblood of many industries: Creative Writing can produce self-motivated graduates with exceptional understandings of team process, of two-way communication and of individual creative thinking . . . They generate consumers of Literature who are of entrepreneurial spirit (Munden, 2013: 36).

Supporting students in the arts and humanities with their creative and writing processes in order that they develop confidence as communicators, critical thinkers and can write in a variety of styles and genres when they graduate can be challenging. Within existing literature there is extensive debate about whether creativity<sup>1</sup> resides in 'the person, a process or an outcome' (Dineen *et al.*, 2005: 156) but this paper argues that cross-disciplinary creative workshops can help students to identify barriers and motivators that effect their creative and written work and that this may facilitate their academic, vocational and personal development. The paper reports on a project in the Faculty of Arts at the University of Brighton where students studying on a creative writing module and fine art students worked together on a series of creative tasks and discussed their individual and shared creative processes. Feedback from students and staff engaged with the project suggests that these workshops can help students to identify the things that motivate and stifle their creative processes and that this can potentially enhance and develop their confidence with their subject and creative work.

This paper seeks to respond to comments in March of 2014, by Hanif Kureshi, Professor of Creative Writing at xKingston University where he dismissed creative writing courses, arguing that studying the discipline has become 'a waste of time' as most graduates do not go on to publish novels or become full time writers. We argue that Kureshi's view is completely outdated in relation to how the discipline is

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<sup>1</sup> The authors identify creativity as being specific to every individual but essentially the result of experience and understanding helping to consciously and unconsciously inform an individuals thinking and practices. The work formed as a result of this is the creative output.

being taught in universities, specifically here at the University of Brighton but also elsewhere both nationally and internationally. In the Higher Education Academy's (HEA's) November 2013 publication *Beyond the Benchmark*, Munden states: 'Creative writing is a growth area and, linked to a wider study of literature in English, will lead to a transformation of English departments' (Munden, 2013: 35). The report also locates creative writing as an important area within Britain's economic landscape suggesting that, 'Creative writing underpins around 75% of Britain's creative industries [. . . which] had the largest growth rate of any of Britain's industries' (Munden, 2013: 35). This statistic highlights the ongoing importance and currency of creative writing in Britain and that the focus of studying the subject need not be to develop as a writer in one style or genre but rather, 'In unpredictable times, innovation will be the lifeblood of many industries: Creative Writing can produce self-motivated graduates with exceptional understandings of team process, of two-way communication and of individual creative thinking . . . They generate consumers of Literature who are of entrepreneurial spirit' (Munden, 2013: 36). In 2013 a survey of almost 2,500 working writers suggested that the average income of professional authors in 2013 was just £11,000, a drop of 29% since 2005 when the figure was £12,330 (£15,450 if adjusted for inflation), and well below the £16,850 figure the Joseph Rowntree Foundation says is needed to achieve a minimum standard of living (Flood, 2014). These statistics mean that the notion of higher education courses producing graduates who go on to become professional authors is not sustainable. Rather (and in direct opposition to Kureshi's view) creative writing courses should support students to develop an arsenal of creative, critical and writing skills that will help them to impact on and enhance creative industries.

Creative Writing courses and undergraduate and postgraduate modules can produce students whose innovation, communication and creativity can help revive and recover an ailing economy and nourish the cultural landscape too. This paper highlights the importance of looking toward a more expansive and socially engaged future, where writing courses are valued for how they may enrich our culture, our communities, our world – and produce students who feel confident about themselves

as writers but also much, much more besides. At the University of Brighton, staff in the College of Arts and Humanities devised a project entitled Living Archives where the aim was to devise and facilitate cross-disciplinary creative workshops that would develop and increase this understanding and provide unique opportunities for students to consider how the skills they are acquiring via their studies might be engaged with the world beyond the classroom.

### **Living Archives Project**

The Living Archives project was triggered by an earlier piece of pedagogic research in which it became apparent that writing students did not see themselves as creative practitioners (Moriarty and Reading, 2011). The research identified that self reflective practice was a potentially powerful tool for enabling creative practice students to identify the barriers or stuck places in their own creative process and the factors that motivate them and that this experience of critical reflection had the potential to enhance their processes. A strong reflective practice might also be important for holding students through the liminal spaces or stages of 'not knowing' identified in threshold theory (Wisker and Kiley, 2006). Orsini – Jones (2008) argues in relation to her study of students learning French that:

'to enable students to cross thresholds it is necessary to devise student – centered activities that allow them to engage both in individual and collective reflection on the troublesome knowledge encountered. The overcoming of stumbling blocks will be greatly helped by the opening up of a dialogue between students and tutors and amongst students themselves' (Orsini-Jones 2008:220)

The Living Archives project aimed to devise and facilitate workshops where this type of dialogue could be generated and explored in relation to the students' studies and post-degree ambitions.

Being self reflective in order to develop a critical form of self awareness in relation to study and practice is essential to improving the quality of students' academic

work and increasing their confidence as a creative practitioner.<sup>2</sup> Reflection can provide opportunities for students to critically reflect, edit and refine a position (Eisner, 2001) that may lead to an enhanced sense of self within their academic work and a more definite awareness of their place within their discipline. Csikszentmihalyi argues that this process of reflection in creative practice requires both 'involvement and detachment' (1990: 248) meaning that practitioners must be effectively engaged in the work during the process of generating and making material. This active and involved time must be followed by equally dynamic periods of detachment characterized by extensive reflection in which the critical position and aesthetic qualities of work are considered. This time of objectivity can help creative practice students to feel less personally attached or enmeshed in their creative work, making the feedback process a less vulnerable and more constructive experience that can help them to develop as a practitioner. Biggs (2002) proposed that creativity is best supported by approaches that improve students' ability to reflect on their ideas, placing the emphasis on their experience of learning and not just the outcomes/outputs. It is important therefore that time for reflection and discussion are legitimized and also embedded into student timetables in order to provide opportunities for reflection and sharing experience and feedback with peers and tutors.

Supporting students' creativity is generally viewed as best achieved through a process based approach to learning and teaching (Jackson, 2002, Dallow, 2008, Danvers, 2003). As part of the Living Archives project, it was considered important to provide opportunities for creative practice students to make 'learning leaps' (Wisker and Kiley 2006) to use their critical awareness to reflect on their own processes but also on the ways in which their peers and tutors work as a way of informing their creative practice.

Ironically, the Living Archives project began as a discussion between two colleagues in the same school at the University of Brighton but who were from different creative disciplines. Both were at similar stages of their careers, both were finishing

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<sup>2</sup> A creative practitioner in this context refers to students who are on an undergraduate degree course in which they have to develop creative outputs including writings, illustrations, contemporary artwork.

doctorates, both were keen to support their students' confidence with creative practice. Through the process of discussion and reflection about vocational, academic and personal issues that were shared and individual, messy and challenging, clear and unclear, the possibility of shared teaching and learning to enrich our research and our teaching emerged. This interdisciplinary and collaborative discussion triggered subsequent meetings, other colleagues and research opportunities were identified, teaching and learning practices have been enhanced which led to a sense of confidence about the potential for the project as an example of best practice for students in terms of teaching and learning but also for collaborative and cross-disciplinary projects that engage staff with research projects and developing curriculum.

### **Methodology**

In 2010 the project leaders were awarded internal funding to run a small scale project with level 5 undergraduate students studying Fine Art and Creative Writing on two different degree courses at the University of Brighton. The funding was awarded because the project aimed to engage the students with the Design Archive (housed at the University) and make them aware of how archive material can inspire creative processes.

The project leaders consisted of two senior lecturers in the School of Humanities at the University of Brighton seeking to develop a model of best practice for implementing cross-disciplinary creative workshops on creative courses in the College of Arts and Humanities elsewhere in HE. The aims of the workshops were:

- To bring undergraduate students from English courses and Fine Art courses together in cross-disciplinary workshops.
- To encourage reflection on individual creative practice through creative tasks and discussion.
- To facilitate safe and dynamic spaces in which to share and explore ideas and creative work.
- To help students identify sources of inspiration.
- To trigger creativity through engagement with collections and archival material.

- To develop an enhanced sense of self within their discipline and to better locate that discipline in the context of their personal, vocational and academic development.
- To identify opportunities for cross disciplinary research for staff in the College of Arts and Humanities.

Students from the two disciplines were brought together in a space that neither group had worked in before and engaged in a series of tasks that were developed from the archival material.<sup>2</sup> They worked together on collage, poetry, reflective and creative writing that drew on their different specialisms but also encouraged them to find new and collaborative ways of developing their practice. The students were asked to combine image and text and to consider how the two genres inspired and challenged one another. At the end of the session, students were invited to reflect on the experience and also fill in anonymous feedback forms. The workshops have now been run five times with different students on each occasion.

The workshops were challenging and some of the students were daunted at the prospect of working with people they did not know and sharing ideas. One of the exercises triggered a student to write the following poem:

A pile of postcards,  
Three in fact,  
Put in front of me.  
“Be creative”, they said  
To no avail.  
I still sat feeling lost and uninspired.  
“Find a narrative in the image”, they continued  
But how could I?  
I could only see a woman, rich, with a weighty necklace.  
  
I became increasingly aware of those around me,  
Pen to paper, a conscious stream of creative thought as they wrote.



Here I am,  
Left in this unfamiliar world of poetry,  
I don't even know anything about poetry.

Shall I say the woman was a wife to a man,  
And bore three children?  
Shall I say she was a widow,  
mourning in her black dress?  
Shall I say she was glamourised,  
for a night in a ballroom with gin?

None of these options leave me inspired.

Maybe I should write a stream of descriptive text,  
Strings of "creative" words,  
Surely that will work?  
I wrote effortlessly with my inexpensive, deep blue pen,  
Which gently rubbed the soft skin between my fingers,  
Leaving them rosy and with a very faint pain,  
Similar to that of a carpet burn you receive as a child.

My eyes are heavy after being teased to half an hour less sleep this morning,  
All so I can write a "creative" poem,  
And this writing is all I have to show,  
A poor show at that.

### **Cat Andrews, Critical Fine Art Practice Student (2012)**

The unfamiliarity of the workshop setting and being invited to work in a way that was unknown whilst also collaborating with new students was designed to reflect potential work-based scenarios post-university. Students were made aware of this intention at the start of the workshop but for some, it did not reduce initial feelings of apprehension. This poem demonstrates the vulnerability and anxiety many

students, staff and professionals feel when developing creative work but also of how despite those feelings, it is possible to challenge creative practice and produce new, unfamiliar and exciting work. Anecdotally, as a result of her experience on the workshop, Cat went on to become an artist in residence on the creative writing module where she has mixed image and text in a way that she had not previously considered which indicates her motivation to take risks and push her own practice in a way that was inter-disciplinary and collaborative which was enhanced in light of the workshop.

The workshops were keen to engage students in the concept that the process of making is as important as the final output (Charney, 2008) and that taking risks and working collaboratively can offer challenges but also other ways of thinking about their own discipline that are potentially inspiring. By articulating their processes and working in interdisciplinary groups, the project found students were ultimately able to develop their shared and individual practices and were supported by working with archive material and collections.<sup>3</sup> Feedback for the project suggested that the students felt positive about the workshops and enjoyed the opportunity to work in cross disciplinary groups and get out of the traditional classroom setting. Feedback indicated that helping students to identify and work with a community of practice needs dedicated time and that in order to be sustainable, this is best achieved by embedding the workshops in scheduled teaching over a longer period of time. The one-off workshops were useful but the students and staff commented that follow up time was needed and that an extended collaborative project that reflected the structure of the Living Archives sessions would better place students to learn from the experience of collaboration and reflect on the impact on their own practice. In response to this, the project leaders have devised further cross-disciplinary events

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<sup>3</sup> The archival material used in the workshops included a set of postcards produced by the Design Archive and packs including copies of documents, both text and image, focused on key figures featured in the Archive. Susan Breakell Archivist at the University of Brighton Design Archives developed the packs. In subsequent Living Archives workshops, the author's collection of postcards representing a geographical place was used in some Living Archives workshops.

and embedded them into timetabled teaching including module development at undergraduate and postgraduate level, off campus cross-disciplinary workshops that also engage Widening Participation pupils from local schools and community projects with residents from a local retirement village and country estate.

The students took part in a variety of writing and drawing exercises, working individually and in small groups that combined the disciplines. They were also asked to discuss a number of questions relating to their creativity and personal motivations. These questions included:

- What conditions are conducive to your creativity?
- What does it mean to be creative and what is the effect of this on your academic studies and life skills?
- What have been the effects of collaboration? How can you take this further?

By taking part in these exercises, we aimed to create opportunities for students to reflect on their creative work and to make the links between the seemingly intangible thing that is creativity and their academic and personal development. Students were asked to reflect on their experience of explicitly exploring and connecting with their creativity and to consider how this might help them with their studies. Students were also asked to complete evaluation forms of feedback on their experiences.

The feedback was also used to help the project leaders to consider the following aspects of the students' experience and develop the workshops accordingly:

1. To identify the specific mechanisms for creativity within these particular groups of students that were unique to each discipline and also identify more generic experiences that support students in being creative.
2. To identify circumstances and material that empowers the creative process.
3. To identify potential blocks to students' creativity and to make use of their comments to suggest possible strategies to support students in overcoming these barriers.

4. To understand how students' creativity and experiences with their creative process helped them to feel prepared for their studies and for life beyond university.

The creative process is inextricably linked to personal development, academic achievement and vocational ambition. By creating opportunities for students to identify and reflect on their personal motivations for work and debate their creative process in a collaborative and social environment, there is an opportunity to support students in the development of their creative practice. We suggest that teaching and learning events that bring students together in cross-disciplinary creative workshops can offer spaces and for students to see themselves more clearly as creative practitioners.

Central to improving students' academic and creative work is developing their ability to be critically self aware, to understand the inspirations driving their work and to provide opportunities for them to articulate their learning and creative processes. The Living Archives workshops have the capacity to achieve all of these learning outcomes.

A model for embedding creative cross-disciplinary workshops into timetabled teaching for creative practice students (based on feedback and our own experience of the project) should include the following characteristics:

- A) Be non-assessed.
- B) Be facilitated in neutral safe spaces away from the classroom and other forms of assessment.
- C) Be collaborative – bringing together students and staff from different creative disciplines.
- D) Combine visual and textual approaches.
- E) Promote the idea of creative practice students as researchers – providing opportunities for students to articulate and present ideas to others.
- F) Offer opportunities for self and group reflection (with a tutor where appropriate) on creative processes and not merely critique on final outputs.
- G) Offer opportunities to articulate and present ways of working.

This model has also helped to trigger research questions and facilitate meaning making that has enhanced the project leaders own teaching practices, in particular how interdisciplinarity can inform ways of working for staff and students and extending the students' and staff creative community was an important part of the project. The idea of necessary attachment and detachment – periods of isolation working followed by not working, reflecting, discussing, engaging with the world and with the things that inspire ones creativity is further evidence of how creative writing as an academic subject is naturally allied with other creative arts courses. Helping writing students to identify themselves in this way can be problematic (Moriarty and Reading, 2011) but it is a notion driving the development of undergraduate and postgraduate courses here at the University of Brighton. As a result of the Living Archives' project, the 2014 Creative Writing MA places the emphasis on cross-disciplinary working, offers work based opportunities including an artist in residence module where the student works with an organization/site/company and the assessment focuses on reflection on creative practice and experience and not just on the creative outputs. This is a further antidote to Hanif Kureshi's belief that the point of all writing courses is to train students how to write in a particular style or genre. A notion that is becoming less relevant and unsustainable in relation to how writing is taught. Rather, extending a students' creative community, developing their creativity and writing skills and building confidence with diverse interdisciplinary projects can furnish graduates with the entrepreneurial skills that will help them to enrich and improve our creative industries and environments.

### **The 'power of making': the importance of a creative community**

A key characteristic of our teaching and learning approach places importance on the physical act of creating. Daniel Charney curated the V&A and Crafts Council exhibition the *Power of Making* in 2011 where the emphasis was on the act of making and how through the experience of making knowledge is transferred. We position the process of writing as part of this knowledge cycle. In the exhibition a text panel *stated*: 'Full knowledge cannot be transferred solely through the sharing of information; it

must be kept alive and passed on through the experience of making' (*Power of Making*, 2011). A feature of the Living Archives workshops was that at the start of the session, when the students and staff are introducing themselves, they begin the process creating text and image by asking each other questions and presenting the information that they gather on posters that are then displayed and updated throughout the session. The students continue to work together on immersive creative activities, which necessitate interaction. Through the act of making with others from different disciplines, the students are encouraged to reflect upon their individual creative practice. Sitting next to someone who is also creating enables the student to see how someone from a different subject approaches a creative task; it encourages critical comparison and self-reflection. Productivity is supported in the workshop environment through the intimate working environment; three or four people sit around a table to complete the activities – and then final critique and opportunities to reflect are shared amongst the whole group and individually. This is to nurture the learning leaps that the workshop has been created to engender.

The act of making with others also importantly supports the development of connections between participants. David Gauntlett in his publication *Making is Connecting* (2011) and online videos (2012), he forms an interdisciplinary study of craft in which he gives three reasons why 'making is connecting'. Gauntlett states: the first relates to the physical act of making 'because creativity involves putting things together, ideas and materials to make something new' (Gauntlett, 2012). The second highlights the 'social dimension to making' (Gauntlett, 2012) and the third relates to the feeling of belonging 'of embeddedness and participation in the world' (Gauntlett, 2012). Gauntlett links his approach to making as connecting to the Arts and Crafts movement (2011 and 2012). Gauntlett highlights how William Morris a pivotal figure in the movement firmly believed in the creative expression of the individual and linked this to the desirable state of having an empowered creative community (Gauntlett, 2011). Gauntlett makes reference to Viscount Snowden's writing on Morris from 1934 stating: 'He aimed at a community of fellowship in which all individuals would share in common the joys of creative art' (Gauntlett, 2011: 34).

## **The importance of interdisciplinarity in teaching and learning**

Sociocultural theorists view teaching as enabling participation and knowing (Wenger, 1998; Wells & Claxton, 2002) The Living Archives project identified ways of nurturing an enhanced cycle of meaning making via cross-disciplinary workshops. The workshops engaged creative writing and fine art undergraduate students in a creative community that helped them to articulate their creative self and reflect on and develop their creative processes – individual and collaborative. An approach to teaching and learning that is underpinned by Sociocultural values is identified here as offering opportunities to share communication on a particular issue which can develop understanding or knowledge (Northedge, 2003). As Andrew Northedge states in his article 'Rethinking teaching in the context of diversity' in the journal *Teaching in Higher Education*: 'The role of education, then, is to support participation in the discourses of unfamiliar knowledge communities' (Northedge, 2003: 19). The Living Archives project and subsequent teaching and learning development here at the University of Brighton, are informed by the belief that a process based approach to teaching and learning where student's creativity is nurtured and supported is important and that learning events where this approach is employed are embedded in creative practice teaching and learning. This approach insures the students are physically involved in the processes of learning via making.

Self reflection and group discussion can help students identify the barriers in their own creative process and see more clearly the factors that motivate them. Orsini-Jones (2008) argues that: 'to enable students to cross thresholds it is necessary to devise student centred activities that allow them to engage both in individual and collective reflection on the troublesome knowledge encountered.' (Cousins: 2009: 208). In the context of the Living Archives workshop, the troublesome knowledge encountered involved self awareness, critical reflection, unfamiliar environments/peers/exercises and this enabled students and staff to explore a range of creative practices and processes in relation to their own discipline and to consider how this might be useful or not.

Academic novices [. . .] cannot simply listen, absorb and imitate. They need to develop identities as members of the chosen knowledge community, so that they “think” and “speak” its discourse (Northedge, 2008: 26).

Cross disciplinary workshops such as the model provided by the Living Archives project, can provide safe and dynamic spaces for discussion and practice that can help students understand and articulate their creative process. This paper argues that this can potentially improve their confidence in their discipline which can help them to better understand its place and its relevance beyond the classroom. This can also enhance their confidence in themselves as creative individuals and creative practitioners which is important during their studies and also post-graduation.

## **Conclusion**

The Living Archives project was motivated by earlier research that identified that supporting students with their creative practice and equipping them with the self confidence that they need to see themselves as creative practitioners is important (Moriarty and Reading, 2011). Opportunities for students to focus and reflect on individual and shared creative processes can help them to better understand their discipline and their place within it in relation to the world beyond the classroom. The Living Archives project was developed at the University of Brighton and offers a model of best practice for providing opportunities for creative practice students to reflect on and discuss their meta-cognitive processes in creative cross-disciplinary workshops. This paper argues that the facilitation of informal structured learning events can provide the ideal scenario for providing students with threshold moments when dynamic learning leaps can occur. The paper also suggests that these workshops should be embedded in creative practice courses and in teaching and learning development strategies such as module and course design. The authors acknowledge that further research must be carried out to assess their potential impact on students' and staffs' creative processes and how this might influence teaching and learning of creative practice students and staff development policy in institutions nationwide.



The next stage of this project is to interview students on modules where Living Archives workshops are embedded. The open interviews will take place at the beginning and at the end of the module. They will be designed to trigger and develop learning leaps that may help with creative practice work. We intend to use the interviews to encourage reflection on previous experiences (academic, personal, vocational) that have informed creative work and how this can help them in their studies and post graduation. These interviews will also provide us with data to analyse the impact of the interviews and workshops on students' confidence and understanding of their processes.

The project raises a number of further questions about how to support student (and staff) creativity and cross-disciplinary practice. It also adds to the ongoing discussion on how writing is taught at university level, arguing that it is best considered as a creative arts-based practice where students are:

- extending and developing creative communities,
- acquiring entrepreneurial skills,
- building confidence with individual and shared writing and creative tasks,
- engaging with work-based scenarios,
- developing writing skills in a variety of genres.

This resists Hanif Kureishi's statement that writing courses are a waste of time but instead offers further support for the argument that writing courses can in fact revive an ailing economy and enrich our creative industries. And it is this ethos that has driven the curriculum development of the new Creative Writing MA and undergraduate modules here at Brighton.

We invite responses and discussion on the following topics:

1. Is creativity and the teaching of it the same for all creative subjects (e.g. design, creative writing, art, performance, etc.)?
2. Where are other examples of curriculum design and teaching and learning events that liberate students from the traditional approaches to their subjects?

3. How can academic staff ensure that they are creating a vision of creativity that is sustainable and links HE with wider communities?

## Competing Interests

The authors declare that they have no competing interests.

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