

## **Out of our minds: Exploring attitudes to creative writing relating to art and design practice and personal identity**

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### **Abstract**

*This research project, now at the end of its third and evaluative year, primarily seeks to support Further Education (FE) and Higher Education (HE) art and design students' critical/reflective awareness and literacy skills through creative writing as relating to multidisciplinary art and design practices, and offers help to develop confidence and greater ownership of learning and participation in dynamic group activities. Through the undertaking of activities, learners explore the relationship between words and pictures and consider the intersections and boundaries where these art forms cross and meet. As a trained teacher, author/illustrator and performance poet who extends his identity into the classroom as part of his pedagogy (Connoisseurship and Criticism. Eisner, 1998), the author encourages learners and peers to also express individual and collective identities through innovative uses of images and words. An extracurricular writing group attended by FE, HE, Postgraduate and Access learners and staff has provided greater opportunity to explore many areas of writing relating to art and design practice – to enhance and improve independent learning and communication within the university culture and without it, feeding into the secondary school 14–19 agenda, thereby addressing strategic Widening Participation targets. The results: a 50-session teaching pack – written and*

*delivered; papers presented at the 2008 University for the Creative Arts (UCA) Teaching and Learning conference, London; Learning and Skills Research Network (LSRN) conference, London 2008; 14–19 Agenda Seminar, Kings College University, London; HE Academy Annual conference, Manchester, 2009. Learners, having found greater identity within a community (Communities of Practice, Lave and Wenger, 1998), continue to work with the author in co-facilitation roles to disseminate its findings into the wider educational community, and its challenging impact has led to the embedding of creative thinking and writing into FE, Access and BA (hons) Graphic Communication Courses at UCA, Kent and Surrey. The project has now entered the final phase of evaluation.*

### **Keywords**

creative writing

personal identity

empowerment

sketchbooks

storytelling

reflective practice

### **Breaking out: competencies, andragogy and experiential life journeys**

For the art practitioner gaining a Post Graduate Certificate of Education (PGCE) after seventeen years of teaching, this proved to be the best continued professional

development (CPD) in reflective and transformative practice – being able to reference intuitive and experienced education back to the theories that explained them was extraordinary. David Kolb’s (1975) model of experiential learning encapsulates our shared (teacher and learner) practice in the studio, a cycle that allows us to get on or off at any point of a continuing sequence of phases where we (1) experience (2) observe and reflect (3) form concepts through understanding and (4) test the new situation and then start again. And yet there appears to be a strong move towards multiple competency-driven education: ‘the measure of what someone can do at a particular point in time’ (Unit for the Development of Adult Continuing Education, 1989: 6 (quoted in Tight 1996)). As a business/management model this may not suit the vocational creative needing to strike a balance between accrediting set skills-based tasks and the thinking and practice that inform their processes. The Greek notion of competency as a ‘relatively permanent quality of personality which is valued by the community to which we belong [...] not simply a skill but a virtue; a general sense of excellence and goodness’ [...] that [...] ‘involves being up to those tasks that life presents to us’. Brezinka (1988: 76) widens the discourse for greater creativity in thinking, discovering and exploring new educational spaces beyond the measured methods of assessment and evaluation that are common to the framework within the academy. It offers permission for new approaches to literacy as related to art and design Further Education (FE) and Higher Education (HE).

It has been fascinating to watch Level 3 FE learners in transition from school pedagogies – being taught, responding to curriculum and gaining examinations – to becoming independent, self-directed, ‘andragogical’ (Knowles 1984) learners with a need to build

on past experiences and delve deeper into themselves, to set and realize learning expectations and fulfil life goals. Sketchbooks and journals are a major reflective tool – they track our learning – a personal space to be explored, for experiments to be undertaken, analysed and evaluated so that we can learn and move on. Art and design students use words and pictures to discover and develop themselves, and for the tutor it was recognized as the starting point of a journey into new outcomes of creative writing. Jenny Moon (2006) cites the journal keeper, Ron Klug (2002), and his own particular, personalized thoughts:

*‘A place to record daily happening, a journal is also a tool for self-discovery, an aid to concentration, a mirror for the soul, a place to generate and capture ideas, a safety valve for the emotions, a training ground for the writer, and a good friend and confidant’.*

(Klug 2002: 1)

### **Assumptions: reflection, meanings and jumping the gap**

Assumptions held for many years were suddenly challenged by self-reflection and measurement against the PGCE criteria. We use the language of art and design (it is our cultural standard and considered the correct protocol within art and design education) and with it, the language of assessment and evaluation as laid down by examination boards.

The openness of the language allows for freedom of interpretation, but personal perception and experience has shown that assessment definitions – their meaning to individuals, teachers and learners – fluctuates considerably (Tappenden et al. 2005),

which can lead to confusion and misunderstanding, at best a considerable variation of intention. Where the grading criteria had been simply read to learners with no definition or discussion – grades are important to students who have grown up within this learning culture, and provide an excellent marker for personal development and targeting of future goals – the assumption had been made that they understood.

Taking the examination grading of the Business and Technology Education Council's Further Education qualification- the BTEC Edexcel National Diploma- and its 'merit' definition, 'purposefully investigate', they were asked what this meant to them in the context of a project. Many were unwilling to even attempt it, as they found it hard to understand what was being asked in the light of their own learning. Students and teachers discussed this issue and ALL were unsure. To include students in debate on these issues seemed correct, and, using the sketchbook as a tool, a workshop was instigated for a dozen learners, centred around thinking and writing to investigate further how we evaluate and assess, to question our approach to thinking (metacognition) to allow them to engage as fellow teachers in the processes of marking and collective moderation (Figure 1).

They found meaning in this, were empowered by the experience, took greater ownership of the session and all reported a greater understanding as a result.

One-to-one tutorials are a great place to investigate understanding in learning, and students are open to engage in deeper discussion. It is a time to read together their sketchbook evaluations and check progress. A realization began to emerge of learners who had to jump across a huge gap when attempting to reference their progress in written

form in the sketchbook. One student described a beautiful, researched Victorian photograph, with eloquence beyond her years, but when I read her corresponding evaluation of the same, it merely described the source and external appearance with no personal insight. Why was her verbal description so much better than her written one? She had made an assumption based on previous knowledge and application:

*'It is right isn't it? Is this not what the teacher wants?'* (Tappenden 2007)

Others lacked the confidence to engage words for fear of getting it wrong or because they considered their literacy as poor. A learner explained how she was frustrated by past experience and could not write evaluations. Despite having excellent drawing and painting skills, out of frustration she would scrawl obscenities over her sketchbook pages. Bolstered by confidence in professional practice as author and illustrator, previous assumptions were dropped and the tutor began to proactively challenge language and its uses from the position of the art and design creative.

### **Telling our stories: encouragement, enrichment and the ongoing experience**

Encountering students with good verbal articulation is not unusual – working with students who have poor writing skills is not either. Many lack the confidence to even begin to read or write; they hate the idea, but with the right encouragement and exercise, should they not be able to do so with greater confidence? Encouraging 'show and tell' techniques prompts the inclusion of students who engage in lively discussion about their

work or even topical debate gleaned from the morning's papers at the beginning of a learning session. Telling personal stories or jokey anecdotes grabs attention; they can link into themes and get learners 'on-side'. After listening to a quip or yarn, some feel boldly compelled to follow with theirs (this can even happen with a large group over 35, especially when they know their peers); where others are too shy or would rather not enact this type of role, they have been consistently seen to be more at ease, brought into the group activities, and tend to be more ready to participate through the encouragement of their peers' willingness to tell stories or engage others in the group in interactive conversation. Our lives are built of ongoing experiences to be shared; they are our stories and mean much to our personal development and social interaction being charged with emotional currency, and as such, must affect our learning. By opening up with a level of vulnerability, it has been noticed that the teacher's own storytelling builds rapport, which in turn builds trust, confidence and a willingness to 'have a go' in a variety of learning contexts. Jennifer Moon relates learning to the context of a wider world through stories. She recounts that telling a story extends its value [...]

*'[...] by widening its context from the world of the individual perception into the social, political and historical context of the individual' . (Moon 2006: 122)*

Certainly, the telling of stories confirms our identity, enriches and encourages others and helps to build a stronger sense of community in a group.

**Professional identity and change: Who am I, what do I have to offer?**

Not everyone is a willing or natural performer – a valid criticism levelled against some of these suggestions – but everyone has a unique identity enhanced by life’s experience and acquired knowledge – much of which extends beyond our subject specialisms, and some activities even hone personal skills. We are our own ‘stories’, which our learners can ‘read’ into. For example, a sensitively quiet musician or reader, or one with an interest in theatre or another aspect of culture, could deliberately weave a small part of his or her personal interest into the learning environment. In his recent visit to the University for the Creative Arts (UCA), Dr Kevin McCarron, stand-up comedian and Roehampton University lecturer in English Literature, alluded the comedy club to the seminar room, citing that the relationship of comic is closest to lecturer under the notion that the tutor is an *‘act whose job it is to directly engage with the audience (students)’* (McCarron 2007). Comedy lecturer Dr Oliver Double at the University of Kent also parallels the nature of teachers to stand-ups, as

*[...] they have to organise their own time, take risks, cope with stress, think through their attitudes, play with ideas and see the world through different eyes’.*

(Double 2005: 262)

In a world where value for money has become key and students ‘buy’ into their education to gain knowledge not just for its own sake but to use in the social and working world, we need to realize who we are in the academic context and beyond. An actor friend soberly advises that you can only begin where your two feet stand, consider what you have to use

and use it well. Certainly, the postmodern politics of 'educational change' weigh heavily in the consideration of professional identity within the institution. Goodson (2003) acknowledges that

*'[...] increasingly, individuals live outside institutional and traditional patternings; they are at once more free, yet more bereft. People's personal missions of change have to be understood within this new frame of the quest for personal meaning. To remake the connection between the institutional and the personal, we need to grasp each person's life theme or his/her story of purpose'.*

(Goodson 2003: 97).

The challenge here is for teacher identities to be confronted and developed through personal identity projects (so, for the reader and lover of words it may well be the exploration of creative writing coming from an identity as practical artist or designer), which can be integrated into the curriculum, where they are 'humanized' and 'galvanized' by a strong sense of internal mission. In seeking to expose a natural and specific identity to bring about change in the teacher and learners for this particular research project, it was recognized that the context needed to be located both inside the university and outside of it, reflecting the teacher's own personal and universal beliefs and missions, but also seen as being outworked within the educational frame as a professional project. The personal commitment would inspire change in the delivery of education and hopefully allow ownership to be assumed by teachers and learners alike. To seek internal change as fundamental to our development as teachers and learners is to reflect in the context of creative thinking and writing upon our stories, analyse them,

revise them, expand them and incorporate them into our practice. This process aligns with the chain of change theory suggested by Sheehy (1981).

Sheehy’s ‘Phases of the creative process’ and ‘Phases of a successful passage’ help to explain the sequence of the process leading to transformation. Within the context of the broad and various activities of creative writing for the practical art and design learner, these stages of change offer a robust methodology that closely links the processes in literacy with those of the visual, practical and performing arts.

PHASES OF THE CREATIVE	PHASES OF A SUCCESSFUL PASSAGE
PROCESS	<b>Anticipation</b>
<b>Preparation</b> <i>Gathering impressions and images</i>	<i>Imagining oneself in the next stage of life</i> <b>Separation and incubation</b>
<b>Incubation</b> <i>Letting go of certainties</i>	<i>Letting go of an outlived identity</i> <b>Expansion</b>
<b>Immersion and Illumination</b> <i>Creative intervention – risk</i>	<i>Deliberate intervention in the life conflict – risk</i> <b>Incorporation</b>
<b>Revision</b> <i>Conscious structuring and editing of creative material</i>	<i>Reflection on and integration of one’s new aspects</i>
<i>Dormancy – a creative pause for the replenishment of self</i>	<i>Dormancy – for rest, reward and play to offset stress of change</i>

(Sheehy 1981: 100)

As a reflective rationale, Sheehy aligns well with Schön and Eisner. The writing activities offered to the learners in curriculum workshops and a weekly, hour-long open access, non-curricular creative writing group allow space for the self to be explored in the light of our lives being subject to ongoing change. To keep personal passion and an excitement in making possible discoveries through thinking and writing alive, while at the same time translating what is personal and dynamic into the context of the educational institution, there exists a tension, but one that is vital to creative development and the unlocking of potential. Without the emotional connection (a place of tension) within a personal domain, made possible through the ‘chain of change’, the tutor has come to realize that learners may not write as effectively. Personal writings within learner sketchbooks, which although intended for course research and evaluation can lead the student to a new place of learning. Here the individual may creatively explore with various forms of writing within curricular projects and also in other extra-curricular contexts. Significant development is possible in such domains. Examples of students using their sketchbooks and written evaluation journals (some courses use two books to record both aspects) in this way produce rich and varied content bringing out the unique qualities of the creator can be seen in this study (Figures 2, 3 and 4).

Of particular note within Sheehy’s change methods are the **Revision** and **Incorporation** stages at the very end of the process. Having let go of writing inhibitions and the perception of former identities, which often suggest to learners that they ‘are not good enough’ and ‘cannot do it’, the students are encouraged to push themselves into a place of taking risks, having a go. This requires space to reflect, rethink and rest, as it can be

stressful. It is not the same as evaluating, in that it does not necessarily require an immediate or active response. Every activity planned has this time added in, and for this reason sessions were and are offered with a week's gap. As a tutor in the context of this project I have become sensitive to this need, where so often we are pushed on by course demands and time restraints that could possibly in some circumstances inhibit creativity and the development of personal identity. Trusting personal experience to experiment with new ideas of creativity in written and spoken language/visual art and design in the knowledge that the risk is worth taking is central to this research and the author's pedagogy, and is practised regularly in education. Working outside of prepared notes, testing the boundaries of the class and encouraging learners to 'construct' new meanings has brought deeper reflection and fulfilment to the learning environment. At worst, it fails and there is always tomorrow! The spontaneity has led to an engagement of intuitive teaching – what Donald Schön (1983: 87) has termed our 'theories-in-action', and after the event our 'reflection-in-action'. Elliott Eisner (1998) builds on this premise by suggesting that we are 'Connoisseurs' of our own practice as professionals and when we disseminate our skills through 'Criticism' we impart awareness and understanding through learning. Upon these foundational reflective principles the whole area of creative writing began to be explored.

### **Creative writing: travelling in the head, across the page and into the virtual**

The metacognitive nature of creative writing has freed the minds of learners and unleashed them to play again with their thoughts and construct them into their use of

language as an art and form of communication. *'Allowing time for the creative aspect of your thought processes to come to the fore is very important for reflective teaching'* (Hillier 2005), and so it was with the emergence of the group. A small initial response to a sign-up board gradually swelled to 25 interested students across FE and HE at Rochester campus. Sixteen attended the first session, and it has been consistently numbering between eighteen and 30 per session since. The average number is 18. To encourage this voluntary Thursday lunchtime group, and give it the feel of something important, yet more informally separate from major subject areas, a decision was taken to consider the skills in thinking and writing that would benefit student learning and increase a personal love of reading and writing (Figure 5). This would hopefully have a knock-on effect on the academic contextual work and enable some of the enjoyment to feed through and embed itself in the curricula.

David Morley, Creative Writing course leader at Warwick University, sees the empty page as an open space with no dimension or time:

*'Everything is possible, at this point endlessly possible. Anything can grow in it. Anybody, real or imaginary, can travel there, stay put, or move on. There is no constraint, except the honesty of the writer and the scope of the imagination – qualities with which we are born and characteristics that we can develop. Writers are born and made'.*

(Morley 2007: 1)

He is all-inclusive in his statement, something that needed to be embraced for our learners – a need to be inspired and envisioned in the potential of such a vast subject. The intention was to initially build a framework of ten sessions covering many aspects of reading and writing practice, including the variables of poetry, songwriting (Figure 6), fiction and journaling, to enable learning development and offer a chance to embed new skills into the various subject specialisms. The range would cover the breadth from poetry to e-learning, from fantasy to taking a literary walk. The tutor's role would be seen as facilitator but also co-learner (in having a completely new subject to teach) – instigator of theory and practice.

The willingness of the learners to openly share from the outset was a joy to watch, and one learner has remarked in a recent feedback questionnaire that *'after the first session I went home, picked up my pen and just started writing and writing'*.

This enthusiasm for those who have caught the bug continues to grow, as they develop into a writing community within the hour-long sessions. The important driver here is once again play. Feeling unrestrained and free out of the usual classroom or studio setting, learners have talked about having their minds opened up, yet still finding structure to help them to learn:

*I enjoyed it and it opens up our minds and it opens up our paths to create writing and how to do it and how to write and look at things in a much more different way as opposed to academic way where everything's kind of do this, this, this, this, this – this, this!*  
*I'm not just saying that, as I said it opens up your mind so you think differently, being on a course being in my actual main course at the moment, it is literally free story writing,*

*we have to learn how to write 3 part stories and stuff, the beginning middle and end sort of style and Curtis's (the author and facilitator) groups have allowed me to open up my mind on how to write things differently and kind of explore and really take in other plays of things, poetry and stuff.*

*(Taken from a peer-to-peer interview, 2010)*

### **A community of practice: impassioned and dynamic**

The anthropological studies conducted by Jean Lave and Etienne Wenger testify to the success of learning where like-minded individuals learn naturally from each other in less formal social groupings. They suggest that we all belong to a number of 'communities of practice' in a range of different settings – e.g. work, school, home – both dutifully and in leisure. In some of the groups it is suggested that we have core roles, while in others we may exist on the peripheries. Wenger defines communities of practice as:

*'[...] groups of people who share a concern or passion for something they do and learn how to do it better as they interact regularly. Three components are required [...] (1) the domain (2) the community (3) the practice.'*

(Wenger 1998)

A community holds three dimensions according to Wenger: (1) **What it is about** – joint enterprise, understood and constantly renegotiated by its members – **domain** (2) **How it**

**functions** – mutual engagement of members, which binds them as a social entity – **the community** (3) **Produced capability** – shared resources (routines, sensibilities, artefacts, styles, vocabulary, etc.) as produced by members over time – **the practice**.

The realization of this theory as practised by the group is of course only part of a larger picture that blends other theories (as mentioned in this text) and methodologies. By placing such heavy emphasis on communities of practice alone would be to exclude more formal approaches to learning and the broader acquisition and development of knowledge. A group of learners might also be in danger of becoming over-romanticized; with such wide differentiation defined by age and ability, members' behaviour could become modified to the point of non-collaboration or power struggles within the group dynamic.

### **Writers on a journey: meaningful and challenging: the evaluation-in-action**

Within the first semester, two group members offered to take sessions and both were lesson-planned by them, leading to successful written outcomes in the sessions.

The careful packaging of explanatory notes and references for each session is intended as a 'ready to go' teaching pack for fellow tutors who wish to adapt the sessions to their own specific needs, and the course framework including all learning materials is loaded up onto 'MyUCA' Blackboard to enable University-wide dissemination and feedback on a discussion board. In the three project phases there are now over seventy different one-hour sessions that can be adapted by teachers and learners where applicable. The group can access other links to relevant YouTube clips, online journals and other writing sites.

Staff and students at the Epsom and Farnham campuses have benefited from this service. In sharing their work as writers who are artists, a number have begun to bring their written creativity into their contextual studies essays in the form of poems and creative prose. Their enjoyment is clearly key to the extension and reshaping of their knowledge, and some have expressed new feelings of ‘power’ emerging as they are realizing their potential.

Each session allows discussion and debate, and there is always a written task with a set aim, the results of which are performed by group members. Most tasks are presented as game activities and involve learners sharing their writing and reading with others. A group poem was especially successful worked over two sessions, based on the ‘noise of silence’ where the students revealed their intuitive feel for rhythm, structure and creative wordplay (Figure 7). Amazingly, they were able to reference the poetry form and techniques that had been instinctively used after the session, which made it far more exciting.

Feedback from the group indicates that they find the sessions fun, absorbing, highly stimulating, meaningful, relevant, learning-producing, challenging, easy to follow and understandable. They value highly the shared experience and acknowledge the definite sense of informal, trusting community and the unique attitudes of individuals who make up the group. One second-year National Diploma FE learner has shared her thoughts on the unique qualities, recognizing different forms of writing that take place and benefiting from others’ opinions:

*'Umm, people and the group are good cos every one is different and unique in their own way and they have got a different idea of writing. I like the discussion part of it to get other people's opinions whereas you're all just writing tiny bits you get to hear and base your opinions, err yeh.*

*(Taken from a peer-to-peer interview, 2010)*

That the group is different and sits outside of the curriculum framework yet allows students to feed from it and apply what they learn to their own individual learning contexts is a good thing, but as one final-year photography undergraduate attendee states, it can be problematic prioritizing and separating:

*'I need to be careful about the balance between the personal enjoyment and the personal needs and the academic needs but I think also I enjoy writing more than perhaps I really realise, and that there is something I am learning about my own aspirations about where I want to go in a postgraduate basis; where I can take writing. It perhaps is not a tool which is subject to other requirements too; it's actually something I want to do for itself and derive a lot of information and power, empowerment rather which I wouldn't otherwise get'.*

But this student has talked too about the definite outcomes and affect on his work as a result of attending and using the sessions as a 'tool' of process, which he feels many more could benefit from:

*'Having said that, I believe that what I have learnt in attending these courses is the power of writing as part of my process [...] it does definitely fit in within the academic process and it's something, you know in talking to other students in my year for Photography that I have tried to explain to them to try to encourage them to attend our group and always currently surprised that they resist that. They don't see writing as a very powerful tool of process in the same way as I have learned to by attending these courses, that you can actually attend something or indulge in an activity which does not seem related to the particular academic discipline that you are engaged in but yet the knock on benefits are very powerful and very important and can open up one's thinking and one's self knowledge which is a very important aspect I think of these sessions.'*

*(Taken from a student dictaphone self-recording, 2010)*

That the student refers to it as 'our' group illustrates the assumed position of ownership; it is clearly exercising the power to change through processes in different creative activities, seemingly unrelated to those of an art and design course that are recognized to be affecting the acquisition and use of knowledge.

The work has developed to the point that it now encroaches on staff development sessions – Teaching and Learning CPD colloquium have been hosted for FE, HE and Postgraduate lecturers at Farnham and Rochester campuses – Widening Participation (WP) art-into-writing sessions in local secondary schools as sponsored by Aimhigher,

Kent and Medway and Aimhigher, Surrey – and is embedded into the contextual element of the National Diploma in Art & Design course at Rochester. Widening Participation (WP) workshops for the 14–19 Diploma, Creative and Media curriculum also use creative writing as a core basis from which projects are devised.

Workshops are now embedded into the Access course and BA (hons) Graphic Design course at Farnham. Successful activities have included a collaboration involving **Dr Oliver Double** from the University of Kent – his stand-up comedy workshops and performances from leading UK comedian **Milton Jones**.

Phase 2 of this research project (second academic year) received greater funding to help embed the research project into the wider University curriculum, and other inspiring professionals who engage words and pictures in their work have been invited to lecture/perform and host skills workshops for our learners and to show future progression routes into HE for students from local schools. Guest lectures included performance poet **John Hegley**, Walker Books children’s novelist and illustrator **Joshua Mowll**, and **John Watkiss**, Hollywood film concept artist and graphic novelist (Figure 8).

**Figure 8:** Professional guests: John Hegley, poet; John Watkiss, Hollywood concept artist/comic book author; Joshua Mowll, children’s novelist/illustrator.

Members of the Creative Writing Group are also exploring potential usage of e-tools and Internet communication, and have begun to archive and publish their most recent writings. Entries to a major creative arts journal competition made the longlist, where

standards for the year were extremely high. One of the learners, a mature Access student with no formal qualifications and severe writing problems requiring one-to-one learning support, was commended for his poetry, and has also reported an improvement in his basic writing skills and confidence with presenting to a group. His art practice is also significantly influenced by his writing where his diploma show work was a welded sculpture based on poetry writing explorations (Figure 9).

**Figure 9:** Access student's writing influencing his art practice.

Phase 3 – on a lesser funded budget – has been involved with embedding project practices into the curriculum, continuing to explore and address the students' needs (especially in the formalities of academic writing) through weekly open workshops networking and disseminating this research project across the national and international research/learning and teaching culture, and evaluating findings to offer further recommendation.

## **Findings**

Reflection is necessary on the distance travelled in this energetic Learning and Teaching project – much has been tried, tested and learnt to help plan and enable future decisions for the uses of creative thinking and literacy for art and design students within the

academy. Shaped through qualitative triangulation methods, action research projects, focus groups, narrative inquiry (dictaphone peer interviews), questionnaires and staff feedback, the following initial findings have emerged.

### **Questionnaire data**

One hundred and twenty first-year FE students were offered the opportunity within their National Diploma Course in Art & Design to attend a number of writing workshops.

They covered aspects of thinking and creative writing as relating to the curriculum. Two of the workshops directly related to the compulsory Key Skills in Communication units involving summarizing information from two different sources and writing formally and without errors. The ongoing expectation of the course is that learners will write in sketchbooks and journals (always a good indicator of formative progress and creative development) and use them as a reflective document of their practice. Learners also need to think analytically and critically and at times verbally discuss their and others' work within an open forum. A simple questionnaire (Figures 1.1, 1.2) was constructed that asked them the extent to which embedded 'creative workshops' (as discussed, adapted and created according to what has been learned through the creative writing group sessions) had helped them to develop or improve their skills in:

1. Summarizing information from different sources
2. Writing formally and without errors
3. Journal writing (reflective, creative writing)
4. Thinking and speaking critically and analytically

Figures 1.1 and 1.2 show the responses to be positive where those who attended (virtually all of the year group) found that the workshops helped ‘a little’ or a slightly smaller number found that they helped ‘a lot’. Those who answered ‘not at all’ in their response to the questions numbered a quarter or less of respondents.

Tutors on the course, who are fully aware that the students do not primarily choose to study on an art and design course to improve their literacy skills, have interpreted this positively. As has been mentioned, many arrive with literacy needs and struggle to make the transition to becoming more independently motivated University students. The reading and writing skills they arrive with often show considerable weakness, and the embedding of these types of workshops can only help to improve the situation. The essays, which resulted in conjunction with a practical design project and research-based case study relating to their practical design outcomes, were credited for their academic structure and critical content. There were 106 scripts attaining the pass standard, just one referral and fifteen non-submissions. This shows a definite improvement, which it is hoped could and will be improved upon (although the current radical change in course structure may significantly affect future development of creative writing workshops in the curriculum). That the construction of workshops always concerned personal meaning and identity and the development of self as learner in the activities may offer a credible reason for the positive responses recorded by the learners (Figures 1.1, 1.2).

The other triangulated data have been scrutinized and the following patterns have emerged in the following positive and negative outcomes:

### *Positive outcomes*

- All learners have greater confidence.
  - Better-ability learners have significantly improved learning, especially literacy and thinking creatively.
  - Less-ability learners have made some improvements to literacy.
  - Learners request first-year course (FE and HE) inductions of literacy relating to art practice, creative and critical thinking skills (*positive and negative outcome*).
  - Learners request more formal teaching in basics – grammar, spelling, essay structures (*positive and negative outcome*).
  - There is greater cohesion of staff practice (in integration of critical and creative writing).
- There are social and educational benefits in informal learning through the ‘community of practice’ type model.

### *Negative outcomes*

- Devotee-ism. Students attracted to lead tutor and his pedagogy – comments suggest group existence may depend on him
- Pressures on already busy tutor to deliver (with perceived ‘unique’ skills)
- Art and design staff ‘feel’ unable to deliver these skills – suggests greater specialist recruitment OR staff training programmes? (*positive and negative outcome*)
- Sustaining the Creative Writing Group beyond this research budget; accessing funding could be difficult
- Difficulty communicating and disseminating work across five University campus

- Formal versus informal structure. Non-curricular course potentially difficult to justify outside of accredited assessment-based programmes
- Finding a place and role for creative writing etc, and it establishing a recognized identity within the institution.

The positive and negative outcomes seem to balance. The impression gained from the data that have been tested suggests that the increased energies devoted to creative writing relating to art and design practice and personal identity have resulted in measurable outcomes for the learners as evidenced in portfolio work, it being constructed of journals, sketchbooks and formal academic writing. There is much room for continued research, focusing on key issues around the subjects relating to our attitudes (1) as teachers – to how we recognize the changes occurring within the academy and its expectations and definitions of various modes of writing as relating to art and design practice; and (2) for the learners – to encourage the exploration of creative innovations for learning and teaching using critical thinking techniques, creative writing, academic and structured writing, which all feed into and weave throughout their art and design practice: an integrated and necessary approach that also helps to bring meaning to learning lives and a keener ability to assess and evaluate.

*‘Enthusiasm continues to grow. The open space is still wide for treading confidently on a trail of wonderful words – writing the way forward’.*

(Tappenden 2010)

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**Contributor details:**

Curtis Tappenden is an author/illustrator, painter, teacher, performance artist and poet who also works in-house for the Design Department of *The Mail on Sunday* newspaper, London. He has written eighteen books on art and design practice and has poems published in anthologies. He also writes for the popular art press and has more recently written for the Travel section of *The Mail on Sunday*.

Curtis lectures part-time in the Further Education Department, and facilitates the Creative Writing Group as part of this Learning and Teaching research project at the University for the Creative Arts, Kent and Surrey.

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**Appendices**

**Figure 1.1**

**Evaluation of sessions: ND year 1, Rochester 2009–2010**

**To what extent did the term 1 and 2 workshops with Curtis help you to develop or improve the followi**

	<u>Not at all</u>	<u>A little</u>	<u>A lot</u>	<u>Tot</u>
Summarizing information from different sources	6	32	21	5
	<u>Not at all</u>	<u>A little</u>	<u>A lot</u>	
Writing formally and without errors	11	32	15	5
	<u>Not at all</u>	<u>A little</u>	<u>A lot</u>	
Journal writing (reflective, creative writing)	11	26	18	5
	<u>Not at all</u>	<u>A little</u>	<u>A lot</u>	
Thinking and speaking critically and analytically	11	24	22	5

**Have you heard of the UCA Creative Writing Group?**

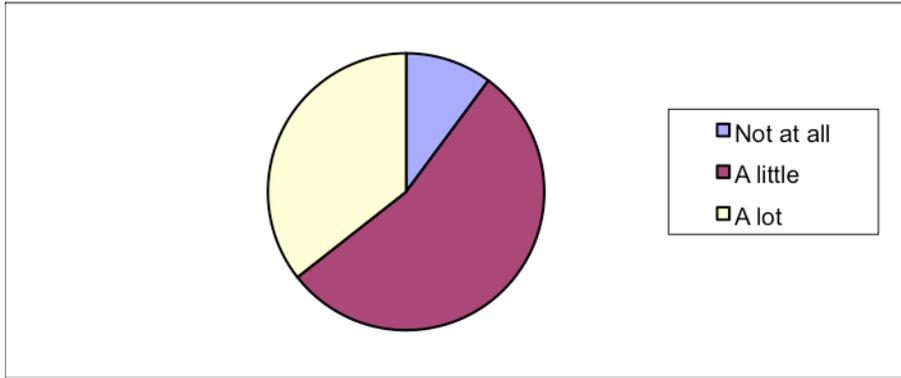
Yes	45
No	14
	(2 no response)

**Have you ever attended the Creative Writing Group?**

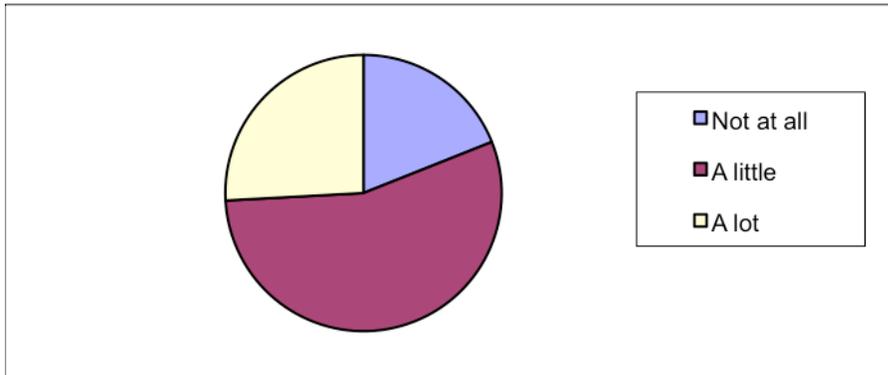
Yes	11
No	48
	(2 no response)

**Figure 1.2**

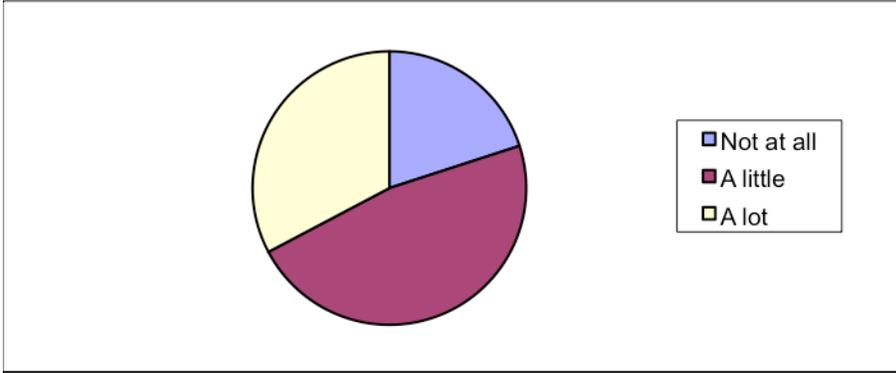
Workshops helped me to develop or improve my skills in summarizing information from different sources:



Workshops helped me to develop or improve my skills in writing formally without errors:



Workshops helped me to develop or improve my skills in journal writing (reflective, creative writing):



Workshops helped me to develop or improve my skills in thinking and speaking critically and analytically:

