

Create Curate Collaborate!

Expanding student responses to the V&A through the juxtaposition of creative writing and non-linear presentation technology

■ JAC CATTANEO, MARIE-THERESE GRAMSTADT
& CURTIS TAPPENDEN

Abstract

Create Curate Collaborate! (2011-12) was designed to be a collaborative cross-institutional and cross-platform action research project, working with extracurricular creative writing groups at the University for the Creative Arts and Northbrook College Sussex, to enable practical, online engagement between participating groups of students, and to support and extend their research abilities and writing skills. The project was a model of connectivity, creating links between two educational institutions and a museum across a range of creative arts disciplines; as well as connections between the tangible and intangible, through the digital medium of Prezi. The online presentation software Prezi provides an almost infinite canvas, a space where students can collect and curate their creative responses. The experimental charge of students working at separate locations as well as together in the resource rich environment of the Victoria and Albert Museum, London, provided a strong framework for research study.

Introduction

Create Curate Collaborate! (October 2011-July 2012) was a joint project between researchers Marie-Therese Gramstadt and Curtis Tappenden, University of the Creative Arts (UCA) and Jac Cattaneo, Northbrook College Sussex. In Britain at higher education level, creative arts courses usually assess writing in its academic form through essays and dissertations (Borg 2012). Students on these degree courses are given no experience of creative writing and little opportunity to experiment with language and text. They therefore often resist writing as an activity (Francis 2009; Borg 2012).

Tappenden and Cattaneo are arts educators whose own creative practice involves both the visual and the verbal. In the years preceding this project, they had both created weekly creative writing groups for higher and further education art, design, media, theatre and performance students in their respective institutions. The extracurricular nature of the activities on offer during these sessions meant that students could produce a disparate range of outcomes, which did not require assessment against the standard range of course criteria (Tappenden 2010).

Create Curate Collaborate!, funded by a UCA Learning and Teaching Research grant, extended the educational idea of 'border crossing' (Giroux 2005) by looking for ways to create a meaningful collaboration between the two institutions' groups. We aimed to achieve this by running joint workshops in the Victoria and Albert Museum (V&A) intended to generate creative responses to physical spaces and artefacts. It was intended that these visits be followed up by students from both institutions working collaboratively on a virtual curation of images and text using online Prezi presentation software. Prezi was chosen because its 'almost infinite canvas' (Gramstadt 2011) allows the user to work holistically on a variety of elements such as videos, text and images within the same space and enables the user to experiment with the 'intuitive clustering' (Tassoul and Buijs 2007) of this content. Furthermore, Prezi enables online collaboration with up to 10 users simultaneously working on a presentation.

The V&A visit was well attended, and students were offered training in the use of Prezi to recombine images of museum objects and associate them with their creative writing. However, although some good Prezi work came out of this, little of it was collaborative. The collaboration between the researchers, however, led to a sharing of skills and teaching material, as well as ongoing dialogues which have extended beyond the completion of the project.

Literature

Tappenden and Cattaneo's creative writing groups in previous years were cross-disciplinary in that the tutors employed concepts, pedagogies and strategies pertaining to both literature and the visual arts and welcomed students from higher and further education courses from all art, design, media, theatre, performance and music disciplines. This practice could be theorised as Giroux's notion of 'border crossing' which takes both educators and students out of established frameworks.

'Critical educators need to provide the conditions for students to speak differently so that their narratives can be affirmed and engaged critically along with the consistencies and contradictions that characterize such experiences...' (Giroux 2005:25).

Create Curate Collaborate! sought to extend the progressive space of the individual creative writing groups at UCA and Northbrook by bringing students together in the richly resourced environment of the museum, and the virtual spaces afforded by the online collaborative potential of Prezi. The creative

writing activities that the researchers planned for the museum were aimed at allowing students to engage with the spaces as researchers, and to collaborate through peer-to-peer learning.

By inviting students to explore new physical and conceptual places, the project aimed to create a broader 'community of practice' between researchers and between students. Wenger (1998) 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'.

The 'domain', a joint enterprise, understood and constantly renegotiated by its members, could be understood to be the framework of the creative writing groups as extracurricular learning opportunities and the Create Curate Collaborate! project, which sought to create physical and online links between the two groups.

The students who attended the groups could be said to constitute the 'community,' the mutual engagement of members, which binds them as a social entity. In September 2011, about 20 students from a range of further and higher art, design, media and theatre courses signed up to each institution's creative writing group. In both institutions a core of 8-12 students would attend a typical session. As the groups were not bound by the structures of the assessable curriculum, students could collaborate in the constant renegotiation of the group's purpose. As Winter identifies in his definition of action research: 'everyone's view is taken as a contribution to understanding the situation' (in Zuber-Skeritt 1996:13). This equally applied to the researchers who assumed equal status in the project.

Wenger (1998) defines 'practice' as 'produced capability'; shared resources (routines, sensibilities, artefacts, styles, vocabulary, etc) as produced by members over time. Each Creative writing group session revolved around a theme and students wrote in response to exercises and prompts during the group. Tappenden and Cattaneo swapped material from the start, and from a few weeks into the project began to use each other's material. The activities for the V&A visit were conceived as a collaboration between all three researchers. Golding suggests that a museum can be: '...a creative space of respectful dialogical exchange for promoting critical thought...' (2009:2). With this in mind, we created exercises which would extend students' practice by means of a 'purposeful drift' (Pinder 2005) through this creative space. Kirshenblatt-Gimblett argues that museums provide an opportunity for reinterpretation: '[...] objects withdrawn from the world and released into the museum are held in a space of infinite recombination' (2004:1). During the museum visit Gramstadt provided training in Prezi software to the students, in order to demonstrate its potential as a tool of 'infinite recombination'.

When organising material on Prezi, the user is able to lay out combinations of text and image onto an 'almost infinite canvas' (Gramstadt 2011), before deciding on the 'pathways' which will create a narrative. Cattaneo's (2008) work on

using posters for presentations found that a significant majority of visual arts students preferred the 'holistic' nature of being able to see all their material at the same time. Gramstadt's research (2010; 2011) has considered image presentation tools and their potential in learning and teaching, for example, covering literature in the field such as Tufte's (2003) critique of PowerPoint, as well as investigating both analogue and digital alternatives to PowerPoint through examples of pedagogic practice. Prezi works like a poster in the phases of its creation: the user can organise words and images across the entire virtual space, and make creative connections between words and images. This chimes with Tassoul and Buijs' notion of 'intuitive clustering':

use a bottom-up process of emergence; postpone early rationalisations and verbalisations; start grouping ideas on the basis of feeling and intuition; and use metaphoric names to identify clusters (2007:16).

We would argue that the opportunity to organise intuitively is pertinent for creative arts students. Borg (2012) makes a strong case for 'writing differently in art and design' and argues that the 'collage' approach may suit visual thinkers who take a 'process' approach to their creative practice. Francis discusses her use of visual methods to help art and design students with their writing:

'The visualisation of the writing process (diagrammatic approach) evolved from many attempts to *talk* about the stages of writing; trying to encourage a 'bit' approach, rather than a mad dash for the 'final piece'. Whenever I talked about doing bits, students expressed relief' (2009:29).

It could be argued that the viewer of a Prezi presentation might experience it as a linear narrative. The presenter's chosen 'pathways' create a sequential journey through the material, although there is an option to move *off-piste* and deviate from the path set. However, we suggest that as an organisational tool Prezi has the potential to allow its user to make creative connections. Tappenden used the software to connect ideas from a random scattering of visual and textual fragments into a sensory presentation poem as a way of demonstrating its potential to students.

Methodology

The Create Curate Collaborate! project conforms to a model of action research in that it 'investigates professional experience (in a way) that links practice and the analysis of practice into a single, continuously developing sequence' (Winter in Zuber-Skeritt 1996:13). Once the project had begun, many unforeseen variables came into play, which altered the course of the research and changed its parameters.

All members of the creative writing groups at UCA and Northbrook were invited to participate in Create Curate Collaborate! and their participation was entirely voluntary. The project had an established ethics protocol from its inception, which included informed consent for the collection of data and the ability for participants to withdraw at any point during the research. The three researchers

kept journals and Gramstadt published blog posts charting project endeavours (www.teachingwithimages.wordpress.com).

The students were allowed time to settle into the creative writing groups before they were introduced to other aspects of the project. Meanwhile, in October, Gramstadt provided a face-to-face Prezi tutorial for Cattaneo and Tappenden and began to create learning materials focused on using Prezi in education.

Weekly activities for the creative writing groups included sessions on Flash Fiction, Writing the Senses, Creating a Character, Journals and Magical Realism. For the trip to the V&A in February 2012, specific spaces were chosen to deepen students' experiences of these ideas. The groups from the two institutions first encountered each other in the Norfolk Music Room, an unfurnished hall with gilded mirrored walls. Here they participated in a series of four Magical Realist¹ exercises entitled 'Smoke and Mirrors'.² Following this activity, students explored the museum to find personally meaningful artefacts, and then congregated next to the sixteenth-century Paul Pinder House to 'write in the voice of an object'. They also engaged in 'All the World's a Stage' activities in the Theatre galleries. These included trying on costumes; building a character; writing, editing and then performing dialogues. The purpose of the day's creative activities was to collect raw material to refine into Prezi collaborations.

The V&A visit represented an opportunity to gather data from both groups simultaneously, all attendees completed paper questionnaires about their experience of the creative writing groups and their use of tools such as Prezi. Gramstadt provided students with face-to-face Prezi tutorials at the V&A visit and with follow ups at their respective institutions in March. In June, one month before the project came to an end, and importantly before the students left the institutions for their summer holiday, Tappenden and Cattaneo requested follow up feedback by email. Both of these enquiries were semi-structured with open questions and the information provided was subsequently anonymised.

Findings

Early on in the project, two highly motivated and technically skilled students from Tappenden's group taught themselves to use Prezi and had a positive response to it; they had questions and ideas which informed our project and they also presented their own collaborative Prezi at the UCA Learning and Teaching conference, January 2012 (Figure 2 over). One of these students noted:

'I used to get extremely frustrated with the lack of creative options available on Powerpoint [sic]. Since using Prezi, my creative ideas for presentations, have had an outlet. [For example, to]...create and deliver

1 The 'curious relationship' between the 'extraordinary' and the 'ordinary' that 'gives magical realism its unique effect' (Birkett 1998).

2 An example of one of these exercises: 'In your mind's eye, walk up to a mirror and hold out your hand. As your fingertips touch the glass it begins to ripple, like the surface of a pond. How do your fingers feel? What happens to your arm, the rest of you? Begin to write: 'When I touch the mirror...'

presentations...create e-books and catalogues to exhibit my work through projects; create E portfolios [sic] for applying to university...as story board, to map my work; spider diagrams...' (from a presentation delivered January 2012).

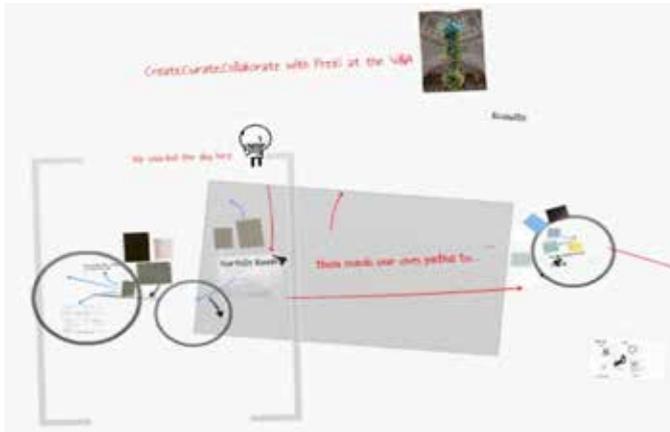


Figure 1 An example of a Prezi inspired by the visit to the V&A: the whole canvas seen in show mode © A Giraud-Telme 2012



Figure 2 Screenshot from the students' Prezi, shown in edit mode © B Viney 2012

Another higher education student attendee of the creative writing group at UCA found the tool useful to begin her dissertation planning. She commented that:

'...the sense of freedom the ability to choose files from online and from your documents and within seconds feel like a piece of art is forming in front of your eyes...there's a sense of excitement my favourite part is grouping and playing around with the paths—you can push anything under your own umbrella and create something personal and close to you. I want to create a map for my dissertation topic so I can have something interactive rather than something in my sketchbook...' (email conversation with Tappenden 2012).

These comments would seem to confirm the researchers' thesis that Prezi's potential for 'intuitive clustering' (Tassoul and Buijs 2007) is beneficial to those creative arts students who chose to employ it as an organisational tool.

'I definitely think that my essay writing has improved as a result...' (by email June 2012).

'Without the writing class my degree show would never have been as strong' (by email June 2012).

'The biggest outcome of all of this was that I moved my final dissertation mark from a predicted fail to a 2.2 almost 2.1' (by email June 2012).

A key finding which has already informed future collaborative research by Cattaneo, Tappenden and Gramstadt is the link between the students' creative writing practice and their practice as artists. The replies below are representative of this:

'I am starting to see a link between my art practice and my interest in writing...' (by email June 2012).

'I cannot emphasise enough how much the few hours we had helped me to look at art and writing in a different way and to see how closely the two art forms are linked' (by email June 2012).

'...it helped me express myself more within my practice as an artist...' (by email June 2012).

An example of studio work inspired by the project is *The Cloak of Dreams* (see figure 4), its creator explained that:



Figure 4 'The Cloak of Dreams' consists of three pieces: a reversible cape made of tweed and canvas (with a removable knitted string collar and leather button), a cardigan knitted out of hemp and enhanced with labels (with people's dreams written on them) and a reversible cloak made out of wool and canvas (with reversible and removable collar) © A Giraud-Telme 2012

'I was innately inspired by the interaction of the work we did at the V&A as it made me understand that I hate fashion exhibitions for the lack of interactions—as an artist it is frustrating when you cannot, touch, try or feel the work in an exhibition and indeed it was this that spurred the birth of 'The Cloak of Dreams' (by email November 2012).

Certain students also testified to the therapeutic effect of creative writing. One student noted that it 'helped me through a very hard time in my life' (by email June 2012) and another student commented: 'Creative writing has helped me tremendously going through difficult times' (by email June 2012). Although these affective concerns were not the focus of our study, as researchers we recognised the transformative potential of creative writing for students.

Conclusions

The aim of Create Curate Collaborate! was to create a community of practice between three researchers and two extracurricular writing groups across two separate institutions. The means for this crossing of borders was the creation of an event where the groups would meet and share creative writing activities in the rich learning environment of the V&A museum. It was hoped that we would be able to create a virtual domain for interaction between the groups through the online collaborative opportunities represented by Prezi software.

Although the visit to the V&A exhibition was well attended, virtual collaboration between the two institutions' groups did not occur. This failure may be put down to many students' reluctance to engage with a new technology; questionnaire responses demonstrated a wide differential in students' technical skill sets. Another reason was that participants inevitably prioritised meeting the deadlines for their assessed coursework modules. The drop-in nature of the creative writing groups meant that their membership was fluid. Peer-to-peer projects require a certain infrastructure, and due to the extracurricular nature of the groups, this could not be created at a course or departmental level.

Nonetheless, through the sharing of skills, pedagogic strategies and teaching materials, the researchers feel that we have created a community of practice which has benefited our research (Gramstadt) and our students (Tappenden and Cattaneo), both in the creative writing groups and our curricular teaching. The responses to the V&A writing exercises and some participants' subsequent use of Prezi, proved that activities which take students beyond the conventional classroom and curriculum give them permission to cross boundaries in their creative practice. Despite the lack of cross-institutional collaborative outcomes, some group participants produced accomplished writing which ranged from personal memoir to performance poetry. For some students being a member of a creative writing group impacted on their academic writing, while for others the extracurricular activities informed their main degree work; this ranged from the production of a garment in response to the V&A trip to sculptures incorporating stories in the form of hand-written text.

Despite the patchy uptake of Prezi, the students who adopted this tool reported benefits, particularly when it came to organising their work. This points to the importance of offering our students a range of tools to work with. As Cattaneo (2008) discovered when researching posters as a presentation tool, students who are given a choice of methods will adopt those which are coherent with their learning styles. Although ideally options should be offered as part of the curriculum, extracurricular activities can be useful to pilot new strategies and technologies.

Finally, it is important to note that in our experience, creative arts students demonstrate the ability to use writing in much more inventive ways than most higher and further education creative arts courses currently allow. We would propose that writing creatively be made part of the curriculum rather than solely

existing as an extracurricular activity run by and for enthusiasts. The potential for the formalisation of creative writing activities has been noted by both UCA and Northbrook College, and Tappenden and Cattaneo have been asked to write new curricula. We would stress however, that despite the difficulty of retaining continuity of membership of extracurricular activities, they have provided an excellent domain for the forging of radical ideas.

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Jac Cattaneo lectures in Cultural Studies on the BA (Hons) Fine Art course at Northbrook College Sussex. In 2011-12 she was granted a Learning and Teaching Fellowship from the Centre for Learning and Teaching as well as winning an Excellence in Facilitating and Empowering Learning award. Her pedagogic research investigates ways of engaging art, design and media students with the process of writing. Jac has MAs in Visual Culture (London Guildhall University) and Creative Writing (with distinction; University of Chichester.) Her short stories are widely published in anthologies and journals. She is currently studying for a PhD in Creative Writing.

Marie-Therese Gramstadt, a research associate of the Visual Arts Data Service (VADS), is currently managing the KAPTUR project working with Goldsmiths College, University of London; The Glasgow School of Art; University of the Arts London and University for the Creative Arts, to improve the management of arts research data. She is also a researcher and digital cataloguer for the Zandra Rhodes Digital Study Archive, making use of her MA in the History of Dress (Courtauld Institute of Art). Marie-Therese has recently rejoined the Crafts Study Centre to work on the JISC SCARLET+ project using augmented reality with the Muriel Rose Archive.

Curtis Tappenden is an author, performance poet, painter and illustrator teaching at the University for the Creative Arts. He draws and writes for magazines and national newspapers, and has 21 books published on art and design practice. His watercolours are in international collections. Curtis won a Teaching Excellence award (2010) for consistent, innovative approaches to learning and teaching. A recent commission involved sketching live, Zippos Circus performers, thereby fulfilling a lifelong passion. The results were exhibited on tour and in the programme. He is currently undertaking a PhD in Education at the University of Brighton studying maverick educators within institutional, arts higher education.