Janie Conway-Herron and Chris Morgan

Flexible Delivery: Creative Environments

Abstract:

In the contemporary university, the advent of online capacities for teaching have shifted our perceptions away from sage-on-the-stage delivery of face-to-face lecture/tutorial formats into more flexible pedagogical practices. With the rapid global expansion of open and distance learning and the accompanying proliferation of high quality learning materials, a tremendous resource base has been developing within the tertiary sector. Most universities with external and internal cohorts use a dual-mode style of delivery that provides quite separate experiences for both student categories. In programs that adopt a converged mode of delivery, students are not corralled into either internal or external mode, rather, all students become flexible learners, with access by choice to a variety of resources and interactive events, each designed and timed to maximise quality learning. The reflexive nature of creative writing makes it ideally situated to offer fully flexible delivery, but, moving to a fully converged model is a complex process, requiring considerable planning. This paper follows on from one delivered at the 2006 AAWP conference when we were just about to embark on a pilot project using a converged mode of delivery in the writing program at Southern Cross University. Now having conducted the pilot we will discuss the experiences we have had of flexible delivery and show the ways in which creative writing is suited to a fully convergent mode of delivery and at the same time pointing to ways in which we need to be aware of the dangers of using it, while demonstrating how we have sought to maintain a safe and creative writing environment for all students.

Biographical Notes:

Janie Conway-Herron is a senior lecturer in creative writing at Southern Cross University. She has a PhD in writing from the University of Western Sydney and a Masters in creative writing from the University of Technology Sydney. Janie has extensive experience as a novelist, poet, musician, lyricist and scriptwriter and her work has been published in a number of journals and anthologies including; *Landscapes of Exile: Once Perilous, Now Safe*, *Australian Folklore*, *Australian Humanities Review*, *The International Journal of Critical Psychology, Linq* and, *Belonging in the Rainbow Region: Cultural Perspectives on the North Coast*. In 2004 she conducted creative writing workshops with Burmese women refugees for Altsean Burma, her work reflects her passion for human rights and explores landscapes of identity in both an historical and contemporary context. Her novel, *The Grace of Clouds* is due for publication in 2009.

Chris Morgan is a lecturer and educational designer at Southern Cross University in the Teaching and Learning Centre. His research interests are focused upon flexible learning environments in higher education and the assessment of creative products in the creative arts, which is the subject of a PhD currently nearing completion.

Keywords:

reflexivity and creative writing - blended learning- flexible pedagogical practices

> The interpolation of creative writing into the humanities curriculum highlights the distinctions in outcomes between a conventional transmission model of most university literature teaching, and a model of student-centred learning where activities are directed towards the outcome of knowledge accumulation based on conceptual change. Because creative writing is student-centred with students creating and responding to textual material it forces teachers to focus on student learning outcomes in the texts and responses they produce. Online teaching and learning, an environment which is particularly suited to the task-based, reflective activities of creative writing, provides opportunities for us to observe, measure and assess these outcomes (Freiman, 2002:2).

The teaching of Creative Writing within universities has undergone an unprecedented expansion across the globe in the last decade that continues in spite of what Paul Dawson refers to as 'perennial scepticism about their pedagogical value and academic rigour, … despite their seemingly anomalous position within the modern research university' (2007:78). The global growth in the popularity of Creative Writing within the tertiary sector has paralleled the rise of new technologies and their incorporation into teaching practice, while in Australia it has correspondingly operated alongside a national downturn in Federal funding for tertiary education. This has created a unique set of circumstances both pedagogically, economically and imaginatively in the now well-recognised discipline of Creative Writing. As Freiman articulates, the self-reflexivity of creative writing has important things to show us in terms of 'a methodology based on a reading/writing approach to texts' (2002:2) when applied to the development of online teaching practices. Ironically, while the word creative might be cause for a diminished sense of the writing discipline's worth in terms of research outcomes, it is often a core attribute for graduates from our universities. Being caught between management concerns about costs of course delivery, and the demands of teaching itself, has also necessitated a number of creative innovations to maintain a balance between the imaginative frameworks of Creative Writing and assuring the quality of the student experience. The answer seems to lie in creativity itself and in assuring that the notion of creativity is applied not only to the discipline but to the pedagogical environment itself.

In 2006 after receiving funding from the Vice Chancellor we began developing a pilot project in converged or blended learning in the Writing Program at Southern Cross University (SCU). The pilot investigated ways to change our teaching practices in order to maximise the potential of the online teaching environment – just as Marcelle Freiman outlines in the quote above – as well as maintaining the centrality of the face-to-face workshop in teaching creative writing. The idea for the project grew out of our reactions to an increasing tendency within the university to differentiate between online and face-to-face teaching with a hierarchy of payment and recognition that saw face-to-face tutorial teachers being paid at 'tutor' rate while online teaching of the same material was paid at a lower 'other' rate. The resulting unhappiness of casual staff in the writing program, who were increasingly being given the online teaching, caused us to ask: What would happen if teaching was not corralled in this way and all staff were teaching across the gamut of possibilities in the units we offered? Coupled to this was a concern for the overall student experience. With a growing number of

external students in our program (one third internal to two thirds external, on average) the majority of teaching resources were going to the more traditional face-to-face cohort. Our project focussed on the task of redistributing the resources so that all students would have the opportunity to share the same pedagogical opportunities offered in each unit. Under the rubric of: "to have and to have not, the gulf in experience between on-campus and distance students in creative writing programs", we devised the pilot project.

In the contemporary university, the advent of online capacities for teaching have shifted pedagogical perceptions away from sage-on-the-stage delivery of face-to-face lecture/tutorial formats into more flexible pedagogical practices. With the rapid global expansion of open and distance learning and the accompanying proliferation of high quality learning materials, a tremendous resource base has been developing within the tertiary sector. However, as funding to the tertiary sector has been increasingly under attack during the last decade of Federal budget cuts, and teachers have been expected to do more with less, questions arise as to how these resources may better be utilized. Most universities in Australia with an external and internal cohort use a dual-mode style of delivery that provides quite separate experiences for face-to-face and distance students. In programs that adopt a converged or blended mode of delivery, students are not corralled into either internal or external mode, rather, all students become flexible learners, with access, by choice, to a variety of resources and interactive events, each designed and timed to maximise quality learning. While Creative Writing is ideally situated to offer fully flexible delivery, moving from dual mode to a fully converged model is a complex process, requiring considerable planning.

In, *Paper Machine: Cultural Memory in the Present*, Derrida questions the configuration between paper and machine and he asks: 'What's going on? What's taking place between the paper and the machine?' (2005:2)? He describes an uneasy relationship where paper is subordinated to 'all these new machines for virtualisation' (ibid: 2). The way writing as black words on a white page invoke whole worlds of fantastic invention that are received as real worlds to their readers is perhaps the first instance of virtual reality and yet we hardly ever recognise it as such. What Derrida is comparing here is the analogue of black words on a white page (instantly containable within A4 or A5 paper parameters) to the infinite capacity of the World-Wide-Web for narrative, and for access to what he terms the 'wild areas' that perhaps epitomize the way Creative Writing lends itself to online environments.

> If everything symbolized by the World Wide Web can have a liberating affect (in relation to controls and all forms of policing and even censorship exercised by the machines of power–of the nation state, the economy, the universities and publishing), it is all too obvious that that only advances by opening up zones without rights, "wild" areas of "anything goes" … (Derrida, 2005:17-18).

Derrida's anxiety about technology finds a parallel in our project where a major obstacle amongst our face-to-face students and our staff was their distrust of the online environment and a perception that it could not be contained in the same way as the face-to-face, analogue of chalk and talk; paper and words. Derrida's journey from analogue to digital, parallels the journey for many students and teachers who have come at a late age to technology. Writing 'more and more "straight into the machine"'

Derrida graduates to a computer around 1987 to a situation at the time he was writing this piece where he 'can't do without it any more, this little Mac … [and] even remember or understand how [he] was able to get on before without it (2005:20).

Spurred on by growing confidence in technology and increasing ability to utilise it, the growth in e-learning has gone from cottage industry to mass global access. In the two decades since the 1990s the academy has experienced significant growth in the use of new teaching technologies such as broadband, wireless, multimedia, podcasting, synchronous web communications and video conferencing capabilities. As a result, both synchronous and asynchronous delivery options have become available to all students and the tyranny of distance is no longer a significant determination of cost of communication, while the tyranny of proximity can be overcome with a fully convergent mode of delivery where flexible course provisions replace the dominance of traditional face-to-face modes.

Creative Writing at Southern Cross University

The history of Creative Writing offerings at SCU is an excellent example of the way increasing access to technology has changed the way we offer our units. The Writing major in the Bachelor of Arts at SCU was first established in 1994, with six units taught face-to-face. Expansion of the Writing program was instigated after an insistent response from students and other individuals who had made contact with staff in the then small school of Humanities, Media and Cultural Studies (HMCS). Other Writing organisations such as the *Australian Society of Authors* and the *Northern Rivers Writers' Centre* had expressed interest in SCU expanding the offerings of units in Writing and providing a targeted award in Writing that could be offered externally to their members. This coincided with a burgeoning writing industry Australia wide and with a particularly strong writers' enclave emerging in our North Coast region. The success of events such as the Byron Bay Writers Festival pointed to the way the north coast region of NSW had an ever-increasing writing profile that created a particular focus on writing as a career option and brought practising artists across a range of writing disciplines to the area.

In 1999 we began to expand our writing offerings, as well as develop an Associate Degree in Writing. By 2001 we had expanded our offerings from six to twelve writing units in the BA as well as the Associate Degree Arts (Writing). At the same external study packages for all units were developed and written. All units were offered both internally and externally, which meant developing and writing external study materials and online environments as well as training staff in the optimum ways of utilising the new teaching options across the range of writing units offered.

A series of amalgamations between 2002 and 2006 saw the School of Humanities Media and Cultural Studies become the School of Arts and then the School of Arts and Social Sciences – the largest school in the university. This amalgamation was part of a move towards reducing the number of schools as well as units and courses on offer at SCU and a corresponding shift to reliance on macro-management at a school and a course level.

In 2008 the Vice Chancellor introduced a plan for all courses to move to an eight unit major structure and the BA moved from six-unit to eight-unit majors. Whilst this has not directly affected the popularity of the writing offerings, the move to only one major of eight units in writing has diminished the scope and diversity of the units we could offer while we were also being asked to do more with our diminishing resources. It was in this political/economical environment that we devised our pilot project and the possible cost-effectiveness of developing a fully convergent and flexible mode of delivery for writing units made our experiment particularly pertinent.

Embodied versus disembodied learning

> If we see distance learning as the logical extension of the Cartesian mind body split in education, we can glimpse in many discourses of e-learning something like the desire for ecstasis, in their vision of the pure mind of the learner liberated from the bodily constraints of time and space to achieve a oneness with other minds in the digital expanses of the cyberspace classroom (Bayne S, 2004:106)

Traditional modes of delivery that favour the sage-on-the-stage model of teaching are too often divided along the lines of face-to-face or embodied modes of teaching, versus distance or disembodied modes where the advantages of the cyberspace classroom outlined by Bayne above are compared unfavourably to the embodied experience of the face-to-face workshop. In the traditional dual mode categories of external/internal delivery at SCU, internal students have to buy a book of readings, plus any other textbooks on the reading list, or borrow them from the library. They are also offered the following:

- a one-hour lecture plus a two-hour tutorial/workshop per week over the semester.
- access to the online general discussion board (without being party to online tutorials set up for external students) which allows for interaction with external students as well as other internal students and the external tutor
- access to the study guide – which has lecture notes for each weekly topic – online
- opportunity to meet their tutors face-to-face on a weekly basis in their tutorials as well as during their consultation times.

External Students, on the other hand, are sent a study package comprising a book of readings and a study guide; they can buy the textbooks or borrow them from the library. All external students with computer access are offered:

- the opportunity to meet with their tutor and other internal and external students online in the general discussion forums as well as smaller tute groups with other external students, where they have the opportunity to workshop their creative ideas in a more intimate environment.
- contact with their online tutors who monitor the online forums and workshops closely and ring each student as well as making themselves available for consultation via email and phone.

What we wanted to do

Workshopping is the primary pedagogical strategy in creative writing. Students come together, either online or face-to-face, to present drafts of creative work for discussion and feedback from peers and from their teacher. Until the advent of the pilot project face-to-face workshopping has only been available to internal students enrolled in any of the three campuses at SCU. This inspired us to undertake a pilot project that we felt would close the gap in experience between internal and external students. The following points outline the kinds of things we wanted to explore and rectify:

1. The existing inequity in resourcing between internal and external delivery: Although internals consisted of about one-third of the total enrolment, it was calculated that they consumed approximately eighty-percent of the course resources, when costs of lecturing by full-time staff are included. In recent years the internal enrolments have been marginally in decline, while distance enrolments represent the program's best growth potential. This prompted a consideration of ways in which we could make a more considered investment in the learning experience of the cohort as a whole.

2. repeating lecture materials from the study guide meant that if internal students have already read the study guide which they can access online or buy via Rapid Print, topic by topic, they either didn't come to the lecture or expected other material to be delivered at the lecture, which then had to be offered to external students in order for equity between the groups to be maintained. This resulted in a marked increase in workloads for lecturers who had often written the study materials.

3. feelings of isolation for external students resulted in a high drop out rate, particularly from those students having trouble with the materials and feeling shy of the online environment.

4. not working in real time with external students meant that interpretations of concepts often have to be done repeatedly with different students. External tutors often end up spending more time on a weekly topic than the two hours they might spend face-to-face.

The Pilot Project

In July 2008 we completed our pilot project in converged learning. The essence of a converged model of delivery is the elimination of the traditional dual mode of internal and external delivery with a single category of enrolment for all students, irrespective of location. Our broad aims in the pilot were to:

- minimise excessive duplication of teaching activities in dual mode
- strengthen and enhance pedagogies that are most effective and provide best value to students
- provide greater equity of learning opportunity to all students irrespective of location
- make better use of existing learning resources for self-directed learning
- make better use of learning technologies where appropriate.

Although weekly face-to-face delivery is still clearly regarded as a first option by many students, the reality of attendance patterns tells another story. Attendance at

weekly lectures often falls away dramatically as semester progresses and students struggle with balancing work, family and study commitments, and the often significant costs associated with driving to class from outlying regions. This suggested that internal students might also, be seeking more flexible delivery options.

A primary pedagogical principle in the design of the units for this pilot was to use each medium for its particular strengths in meeting students' learning needs. It was considered that the existing high quality print-based materials very effectively carried the content of the unit. The study guide was therefore made available to all students in print form free of charge, and the additional costs of this were factored into the delivery mix.

Students come together for workshopping either online or face-to-face, to present drafts of creative work for discussion and feedback from peers and the teacher. Distance students workshopped online using asynchronous discussion threads, these students had commonly expressed some dissatisfaction with online workshopping, concerned that it entailed a lot of reading on screen at night, that it was passive, and not nearly as engaging as its face-to-face counterpart. It was therefore decided to expand and strengthen the face-to-face components of all units in the project, via the use of travelling writers' workshops. An analysis of student demographics revealed that approximately seventy-five percent of students lived along the eastern seaboard from Brisbane to Sydney and were within commuting distance of at least one of the three SCU campuses, or a Sydney destination. In addition, the Sydney destination provided a relatively inexpensive opportunity for those located in other parts of Australia to fly in for a one-day intensive. Utilising cost savings from the deletion of weekly lectures, the travelling writers' workshops were introduced as a key component of the new delivery mix. Weekly workshops in on campus were discontinued, in favour of the travelling workshops. In effect, this created a single, flexible, equitable mode of study for all students, with significantly increased opportunities for students formerly categorised as 'distance'. It was proposed that the synchronous web communication software, 'Elluminate' would also be employed as another tool for student interaction and workshopping, particularly for those who were unable to attend live workshopping events.

Although there was no necessity to significantly alter assessment tasks, it was necessary to consider how effectively students would be supported to fulfil assessment requirements given the changes in the delivery mix. We considered that the study guide, which includes activities and prompts, combined with workshops and online interactions, would provide the mainstay of student preparation and support for assessment. However, we were aware that on-campus students, who had previously experienced weekly lectures and workshops, would feel the loss of that structure and weekly interaction. As a result, it was decided to schedule a weekly un-facilitated drop-in time, in a designated room on campus, where students could meet, discuss issues and assessment work-in-progress. This time also coincided with the Unit Assessor's student consultation time, in which students could consult in person about any issues or difficulties.

Pilots were conducted in four units over three semesters, from Semester 1, 2007 to Semester 1, 2008 inclusive. These included two upper-level units and two introductory first year units. The advanced experimental writing unit, *Writing from*

the Edge, was selected for the first pilot and *Writing Project* another upper-level unit was piloted in second semester 2007 with similar delivery arrangements to *Writing from the Edge*. In Semester 1, 2008 we piloted two introductory units in the writing major *Introduction to Written Texts and Introduction to Creative Writing*. These two units work with a complimentary focus that provides foundation reading and writing skills for beginning creative writing students. The units are pre-requisites for all other writing units and the cohort in each is generally large with one-hundred-and-fifty or more students enrolling. Special care was taken when introducing the converged learning mode to these first year students to:

a) ensure introductory units had enough face-to-face contact to provide optimum learning conditions for novice students.
b) ensure that commitments were met for students who had enrolled face-to-face.

All students were encouraged to make their own decisions about study options choosing from the following flexible mix of resources and events:

- free supply of print-based study guide and book of readings
- workshops in a choice of locations: Sydney, Coffs Harbour, Lismore and Brisbane/Gold Coast
- online workshopping for those unable to attend
- online discussion and support for all students
- synchronous web communications sessions were also provided for those students who were are unable to travel to the centres where the workshops were held.
- the study guide exercises and assessment were shaped to support the four seminars with a modular approach to the material that fitted with the workshop schedule.

What we found

Student satisfaction with the altered delivery arrangements can be best described as 'a mixed bag'. Students resident in the environs of Lismore and Coffs Harbour and Tweed Heads who would normally have experienced weekly classes felt somewhat cheated by this experience. There was a spectrum of responses but the majority felt that they were being 'turned into externals', and that their motivation declined without the weekly stimulus of lectures and workshops. Comments from them included things like, *'It was my first time as an external student and I lost motivation without the face-to-face contact'* and *'It was difficult, I felt as if I was stuck at home, reading*'. 'On the other hand, students who would normally be classed as externals, and who now had access to face-to-face workshops found the experience to be quite transformational, and greatly appreciated the opportunity for attendance. They made comments like, '*The workshops were innovative I loved them'*. '*Face-to-face was a good experience, interesting and enjoyable*'.

Almost all students who attended the workshops, irrespective of location, found it to be highly rewarding and well worth the effort of attendance. This confirmed our belief that in Creative Writing, the intensive workshop is the best way in which to provide an immersive, interactive, developmental experience for students. Attendance at workshops, however, was surprisingly below expectations. Student feedback revealed a plethora of issues in relation to timing, competing commitments, travel expenses, and an unexpected theme: a fear of attendance and exposure of one's creative work in a public space. Efforts were made to accommodate these issues, and to create a 'buzz' around the workshops that would encourage external students to participate in greater numbers. Yet it seems that in the same way that some students will need and demand

a highly directed on-campus experience, so too will some demand a 'purely distant' experience and choose not to attend scheduled events unless they are made compulsory. There is a distinction to be drawn here between students' 'in-principle' demands and the reality of their lives; the Writing program contains a highly diverse student body with seemingly endless varieties and combinations of motivation, needs and preferences in relation to their study.

Students' responses to the online components were also mixed. Those distance students who were familiar with the format and protocols of online interactions were essentially satisfied, whereas on-campus students who were experiencing it for the first time, found it of limited value, particularly when considered as a substitute for face-to-face interactions. Common concerns included too much reading on screen, a lack of spontaneity that comes from face-to-face interactions, and too much irrelevant 'chat' between students. For many, the online components function as integral to their teacher and peer communications and workshopping, while for others it is a minor, almost irrelevant aspect of their study. Comments ranged from '*online is hard, I needed more direction*'. '*The discussions were too open. Everyone thought something different*'; and '*I was intimidated by posting online, but received helpful feedback from the tutor*' to '*I liked it. It looked like a lot of work, but in the end I didn't contribute all that much. It was good to see others' insecurities*' And '*it's up to us to participate. You could engage students more through questions and constant activitie*s'.

Initial trials in synchronous web communications proved to be problematic for both the teachers (who required more staff development and an upgraded computer) and students who experienced a range of technical difficulties in getting started. While we are optimistic that synchronous web communications will prove to be a useful addition to the flexible delivery mix, it requires more time and investment than we were able to give it in these pilots.

> As part of a larger system we need to cast our nets wider, to teach in order to provide education, the knowledge and skills to those who will contribute to society as practitioners with a good understanding of writing, language and representation, and with the capacity to think independently and critically(Freiman, 2002:11).

Like Freiman we feel that it is imperative to cast our nets wider and to utilise and incorporate the extraordinary range of pedagogical tools available to us a teachers of Creative Writing in the twenty-first century. In so doing we are also ensuring that in the future Creative Writing will be taught by a new generation of practitioners equally conversant with analogue and digital mediums and able to easily embrace Derrida's (2005) notion of 'the book to come', where the language of writing is equally at home on the page or in cyberspace.

Despite the variety of issues that arose in relation to each of the components of the delivery mix, we felt that the range of options in the pilot project provided students with a sound pedagogical structure to their study, and a reasonable series of choices associated with how they engaged in the learning. The move towards more flexible delivery of units is intricately connected to new teaching technologies. Although most of these technologies were employed at some point during the pilots, in at least an

exploratory way, there is still much to be learned from both a teaching and learning perspective. However student feedback from the project indicates that interest in and uptake of new learning technologies is highly variable and generally conservative. We need to know much more about students' current technological capacity and learning preferences before we can confidently make a serious investment in particular technologies. It should also be recognized that teaching in a converged mode makes complex demands on teachers, and requires confident mastery of a range of technologies. The issue of staff development for sessional staff is particularly critical, given the volume of teaching that they conduct and the minimal current allocations for staff development.

Where to from here?

In the writing program at SCU, there is no longer any point in delivering lectures when the content is fully explicated in study guides available to all. Similarly, there is no point in limiting the writers' workshops to on-campus situations, when they could be readily made widely accessible. There is no longer any logic in restricting online forums to externals only, when all students are seeking greater flexibility. A considerable amount of duplication in teaching can be eliminated, while strengthening and giving new vigour to the pedagogical strengths of our program. Yet there is a range of stumbling blocks apparent in current workload models that create significant disincentives for staff to become more flexible in their teaching: In traditional notions of teaching, lecturing is still accorded a privileged status over a cluster of activities referred to as 'facilitation of learning' – workshops, online teaching, synchronous web communications sessions, one-on-one phone support, and so on. Yet in flexible learning these activities are primary, higher order and comprise the substance of the learning encounter. They need to be undertaken with considerable professionalism and expertise to engender student engagement and satisfaction. While these activities retain their lower order status in the hierarchy of teaching, academics will have little incentive to reconceptualise their teaching and lectures will remain the cornerstone of teaching, irrespective of their pedagogical appropriateness.

Clearly converged learning will not deliver any wholesale cost savings to the University. While we need to ensure that any new arrangements are no more expensive than the existing mode and will not create additional burdens in terms of workload, it is very difficult to quantify how these altered arrangements, in total, compared with standard costs of running a unit in traditional dual mode. While it is recognized that money was saved by withdrawing the weekly delivery of lectures and workshops on campus, and at least some of those savings were passed on to converged delivery arrangements, the final balance of cost is still very unclear. Although we are confident that costs in the pilots of upper-level units did not exceed budgetary constraints, a detailed retrospective costing of the introductory units, where students were in greater need of support revealed a significant overrun in the converged mode. We see particular advantage in being able to make a strategic investment in certain units in the program, such as core and first year units, with less intensive and therefore less expensive delivery patterns in upper level units, where students may be expected to be a little more self-directed.

Creative Writing as a discipline is eminently suited to a converged delivery mode, but until such time as the university decides on a whole university approach to converged

or blended delivery of courses it will be necessary to take a cautious approach to adopting this strategy in the writing program at SCU. While our optimism in regards to the potential for blended learning capacities is great, our restraint comes purely from the way our dreams for the future are tempered by the reality of the present. But as Cixous writes:

> It is what dreams teach us: not to be afraid of not being the driver, since it is frightening, when we write to find ourselves in a crazy book. The book writes itself, and if by chance the person opposite you should ask what you are writing, you say you don't know. Yet the book is written only if it has an engine. A book that writes itself and carries you on board must have an engine even if you don't know how it works, otherwise it will break down (Cixous, 1993:100).

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