

11: Open access online creative writing workshops

Name and role

Iain Barr, Learning Enhancement Manager

Contact details

iain.barr@york.ac.uk

Institution name

University of York, Centre for Lifelong Learning

Background

For 25 years, the Centre for Lifelong Learning (CLL) has offered open access, discrete provision to the local community on behalf of the University of York. CLL offers both accredited and learning for pleasure courses to the general public; until October 2007, these took place as face to face classes on the university campus with class sizes between 10-30 students.

This project aimed to attract new students to a distance learning course, exploring the basics of creative writing, without the need to ever physically attend the university campus. To this end, Blackboard was chosen as the platform for this new method of delivery, centrally supported by the university's E-Learning Development Team in a secure learning environment requiring a university username and password.

Intended outcome(s)

The primary objective of the project was to find new marketplaces for lifelong learning courses, which traditionally attract students only from the immediate environs. CLL's strategic remit is to increase access to the university for non-traditional learners. As a currently popular field of study, it was felt that creative writing was a prudent subject choice, and would be particularly conducive to online discussion and peer learning in an asynchronous environment through open blogs and wikis. Moreover, the project aimed to evaluate the viability of developing group dynamics, comparable to those established in the classroom, for face-to-face creative writing workshops, and to comprehend the characteristics of effective writing within an alternative learning environment. The impact of different models of delivery, and the influence they had upon writing style, was a further area for exploration.

The challenge

As a provider entirely new to distance learning, a number of factors dictated the strategic direction of the project. Whilst it was felt that many of the writing exercises which students would be asked to complete each week would not pose difficulties in themselves, the mode of delivery and the associated toolsets were the areas which it was felt would create the greatest difficulties for non-traditional students. As distance learners they would not have the opportunity for a face to face induction on the Blackboard platform, nor be working on centrally supported university computers.

Induction was therefore offered in a number of ways:

- Students were given access to the module three weeks prior to the start date and asked to undertake a number of induction activities which effectively offered an opportunity to 'road test' their computers in terms of being able to access certain file types and media formats, in addition to being provided with netiquette guidelines and visual introductions to the blogging process.
- Students were also given early access to a social blogging area, the Virtual Pub, with regular pre-course postings from the tutor and supervisor offering pastoral support.

The first week's exercises offered a highly contextualised series of writing exercises, requiring students to introduce themselves, describe an everyday object as obliquely as possible (and guess what each other were describing) and provide a description of where they would be writing. Through these very visual exercises, all offered as open blogs, students quickly developed a tangible sense of who else was undertaking the course with them, became familiar with the toolset and began to feel comfortable with the blogging process before their more personal writing was submitted for peer review.

Ensuring that the group worked at a similar pace was also important to developing a sense of 'group' within the cohort, and to this end, the module was designed with a rigid adaptive release mechanism so that students would only be able to access new materials on a weekly basis, at 9am on a Monday morning. All responses to exercises were posted via blogs, and this asynchronous framework also supported the intention of reaching an international market - initial cohorts brought students from Thailand, Germany and the USA.

Achieving a sense of trust within a creative writing group is also of paramount importance, and this also formed a key challenge for the project. To assist students develop a sense of who was guiding their studies, each weekly collection of exercises was introduced by a short podcast from the tutor. However, one challenge of introducing multimedia elements to the project was that students were working on a range of computers with a variety of internet connections. Therefore such enhancement components were used liberally throughout to ensure that they actively supported the learning outcomes set the week they were utilised, with alternative delivery mechanisms provided for those using less recent IT-equipment.

Established practice

Although CLL has run face to face creative writing classes for a number of years, this project was very much a departure from previous practice. The project team were keen to re-create a sense of 'workshop', from the outset yet it was decided that this would not be something that could be achieved through current practice due to the delivery mechanism and physical isolation of students. Even though blackboard offers synchronous chat tools, one of the key drivers for the project was flexibility, and that no student should have to be online at a particular time. New ways of developing this group dynamic were therefore sought using the asynchronous toolset which was available to ensure that an effective group dynamic could be established which would cement the necessary atmosphere of trust for a creative writing workshop.

The e/blended-learning/ICT advantage

The immediate advantage of embracing a distance learning approach was the new markets with which the project engaged. Since its inception, the module has run for ten consecutive terms, and on each occasion, around 30% of students have been from overseas, broadening the student experience as a whole. The project has also engaged students who would perhaps be less willing to expose themselves and their work to public criticism in a face to face workshop - the relative anonymity of the virtual learning environment appears to act as a buffer for peer

comments. Moreover, the project has also attracted students who, for mobility reasons, may find weekly class-based visits to campus daunting; this was an added bonus in terms of student inclusivity which was not considered at the project outset even though the module itself was designed with accessibility in mind.

Pedagogically, the asynchronous learning environment has also led to more constructive feedback, with students having the opportunity to reflect on their peers' work. In the classroom environment, workshops can lead to kneejerk comments which are of little use to the writer, but through the use of blogs, students were able to step back from a newly presented piece of writing and offer more considered feedback to one another.

Institutionally, the success of this module has been significant. Although projects such as this require a degree of front-end investment in terms of design and deployment, the ability to roll out the module repeatedly has made this project a cost-effective one as the tutor need serve only as a facilitator, with the supporting materials readily available for each individual delivery.

Key points for effective practice

Ensuring the group work together at the same pace is a difficult balance to achieve, but effective design through adaptive release at the outset is essential to success. This project also worked on a highly modular level, with each week's exercises being independent of previous work, so if students were unable to complete the tasks for a particular week, they would be encouraged to focus on the current tasks rather than falling behind in order to catch up.

It is essential that students know how long they should wait before they expect a response to a blog entry from a tutor – for this particular project the time lapse was set at a maximum of two days. This was made clear in the first few weeks, and more enthusiastic students were initially concerned that postings from the tutor were not acknowledged with the same alacrity they themselves displayed. Similarly, regular group announcements were made over the course of each week to reassure students that they were not typing blindly into a virtual abyss. These are small measures to take but ensure that the parameters of facilitation are transparent and clearly established.

The tone of the facilitator is one of the most salient factors on any distance learning programme, as without any blended face to face support with which to temper written comments, students can easily misconstrue well-intentioned constructive remarks – this has happened only rarely. The university's E-Learning Development Team offer facilitation training to reinforce the value of creating a supporting and inclusive learning environment, and this has been bolstered by our own approach of ensuring that where criticism is offered, praise is also offered in the same posting.

Conclusions and recommendations

CLL is fortunate to operate with an institution which offers excellent technical e-learning support centrally, allowing the project team to focus on the pedagogic outcomes of the learning experience. Blackboard has offered a robust platform on which to deliver the module, and student evaluations overwhelmingly state that the technology is readily intuitive and does not detract from the priority of making students better writers.

Nationally, there are few such learning for pleasure distance learning programmes in this discipline and, therefore, there is currently limited competition. Marketing has been minimal and conducted primarily through web-based activities, but has still attracted a wide global audience, indicating that provision of this nature is something that is actively being sought by creative writers.

Open access provision of this nature offers a dual challenge however; students may be unfamiliar with both the discipline of creative writing and have very limited IT skills. This module was developed and tested over the course of nine months to try and ensure that both of these issues were considered throughout, and the initial investment required to create an interactive, intuitive and supportive learning environment for non-traditional learners should not be underestimated.

Additional information

Sources

This project has proved so successful that it has led to the creation of a 60-credit Higher Education Stage One certificate award in creative writing via distance learning, with many of the students who began the project with us requesting further provision which would enable them to gain academic credit for their studies.

This open-access, accredited programme of study has now been in operation for two academic years, and the first cohort will complete in the summer of 2011 – full details of how this programme breaks down at a modular level can be found at <http://www.york.ac.uk/inst/cce/Centrepages/distance.htm>.