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Community and Individuality: Teaching and Learning Insights From a Postgraduate Online Writing Program

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Abstract

How should lecturers teaching postgraduate creative writing in an online master of arts build and maintain e-community to support and socialize learners? The study proposes that such programs need to attend to writers' investments in developing identities while promoting socialization and sense of belonging. Grounded in literature on communities of practice, imagined community, and identity, the study draws on social constructivist and poststructuralist insights and contributes to the relatively unexplored area of pedagogy for teaching writing online. The study uses qualitative descriptive analysis to narrate themes from two datasets in the form of a *métissage*. Data from lecturer-e-moderators and students indicate that strategic e-moderation encourages collaboration and maximizes pedagogical potential in forums. Strategic e-moderation builds a sense of community by fostering critical friendships. The study emphasizes the need for e-moderators to develop participants' investments in working in communities. The study reveals that although postgraduate writing students come to value learning via critical friendships and communities, they also demand particularized feedback from e-moderators and peers. Findings suggest that students need to develop writing identities and voices can be met by a pedagogical approach that harnesses the potential of *community* while offering response to *individual* development. The study concludes that pedagogies of community in teaching writing online need to benefit both collectively and individually. This works when writers apply discipline-specific literacies and professional skills in critiquing peer texts, while responding to feedback from their community of practice, facilitated by e-moderators.

Keywords

writing and pedagogy, online teaching and learning, community of practice

Introduction: Community of Practice (CoP) Pedagogy

Of all the disciplines, writing—incorporating *creative* writing—is one of the most compatible with online delivery (Andrew, 2010; Beck, 2004; Freiman, 2002; Gillam & Wooden, 2013). This compatibility is underinvestigated in the creative writing discipline. Pedagogical insights can, however, be gleaned from studies elucidating online composition and rhetoric, notably Scott Warnock's (2009) *Teaching Writing Online*, and work on online communities in higher education (HE) following *e-moderation* (Salmon, 2000). These resources do not deal explicitly with the postgraduate-level aspirational *creative* writers who are my subjects in this article. Because, as both Warnock and Salmon stress, there is a demonstrable public demand for online programs, and because our century also demands the pedagogical application of new technologies for *creative* writing (Harper, 2011) as well as for non-literary and rhetorical writing, those invested in teaching writing need to reconsider what teaching (creative) writing online involves and to apply appropriate pedagogies. The article responds to Guglielmo's (2009)

call for studies on “how might we share teaching with students in ways that help them to grow as writers and communicators while supporting their peers toward similar growth.” There is a clear need to develop discussion of what teaching (creative) writing in asynchronous online environments looks like, particularly for those engaged in writing at *post-graduate* (master's) levels. For this reason, I address the following question:

What pedagogical strategies enable postgraduate creative writing students to develop individual discursive identities while harnessing the online environment's potential for learning via communities of practice?

In the process of pursuing this enquiry and building on the North American and British studies touching on online

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community building, I consider how key concepts from the educational applications of social constructivism and post-structuralism provide useful lenses through which to view the subject. In particular, I focus on the social constructivist concepts of *CoP*, *imagined community*, and *sense of community*; introduce the notion of *critical friendship*, a critical and dialogic species of collaboration; and describe the ideas of *voice* and *discursive identity* as they apply in the context of writing online. The article aims to create insights for online writing instructors, but particularly to cast new light on the discipline of creative writing.

I first consider *identity* as it applies to online postgraduate (creative) writing students in the light of poststructuralist insights into identity as in flux, undergoing change, a site of struggle and both informed and undermined by dominant discourses such as fixed generic notions of what good writing looks like (Ivanic, 1998; Norton, 2000; Weedon, 1997). This argument is particularly strong in the work of Suresh Canagarajah (2004) in critical pedagogy where the “academic” text is populated with unquestioned assumptions about the power of privileged discourse requiring what he metaphorically describes as “pedagogical safe houses” for accommodating the norms and approaches those from foreign and second language backgrounds bring (p. 116). Safe houses—sites of sharing of deeply invested personal texts—are crucial in creative writing pedagogy. Identities are constructed, negotiated, and under *critical friendship* (defined shortly) co-negotiated, via language in e-communities. As Bonny Norton indicated in a study of language learners’ identities, “the role of language is constitutive of and constituted by a learner’s social identity” (Norton Peirce, 1995, p. 17). Similarly, in Gillam and Wooden’s (2013) study of first-year composition students, “each participant is . . . and ever-evolving product of numerous forces, conscious or chosen or invisible and involuntary.”

Central to this conceptualization of identity is the belief that identities are created, negotiated, and contained in discourses (hence, *discursive identities*). As Gee (1996) defines them, “Discourses” are

ways of behaving, interacting, valuing, thinking, believing, speaking, and often reading and writing, that are accepted as instantiations of particular identities by specific groups. They are *ways of being* in the world; they are *forms of life*; they are socially situated identities. (p. 3)

In asynchronous (that is, not streamed live) online writing programs, students create and recreate “socially situated identities” by representing themselves discursively (that is, by textual means) over the duration of the program even if they may be physically disembodied (not in person or in real time). Gillam and Wooden (2013) remind us, however, that online writing students are not *actually* disembodied; rather “their embodied selves have become separable from the processes of learning and writing.” Hence, their writings are

emergent enactions of their lived experiences grounded intertextually. These intertextual representations embody their developing voices as writers and they are affected by three interconnected pedagogical interventions. First, there is the e-community of peers in which they study and, second, the insights of the e-lecturer. Third, and crucially from the perspective of autonomy, is their own *analytical* self-reflection, including their re-inventive reflection between and among drafts (Irvin, 2004) and their *creative* reflection on their discoveries about their emerging practices (Arnold, 2007). Each of these interventions is crucial in teaching and learning creative writing online. These interventions play major roles in helping address my line of enquiry. The e-community I propose such programs should aim to achieve is a form of CoP.

According to his website, Etienne Wenger (2006) defines a CoP as “a group of people who share a concern or a passion for something they do and learn how to do it better as they interact regularly.” The core features of Wenger’s (1998) CoP, originally a model of apprenticeship, are all directly applicable to an e-writing community. They are *mutual engagement* (the regular interactions of community members), *joint enterprise* (the members’ common endeavor, goal, vision, or pursuit), and *shared repertoire* (ways of thinking, speaking, and expressing common to a community). Through the regular sharing of repertoire—weekly exchanges of text in an e-discussion forum or wiki, for instance—students gain a sense of themselves as writers and take an interest in the development of others’ “voices” (a term I return to shortly). Their joint enterprise—their common desire to find and/or develop their writerly voices—ensures that they are invested in the discursive productions of others as well as their own. In a study of online communities of practice, Alfred Rovai (2002) describes *desire to learn*, in this case writing, as the core uniting factor: “Learning represents the common purpose of the community as members . . . grow to value learning and feel that their educational needs are being satisfied through active participation” (p. 6). Working together, the three components of a CoP affect the teaching and learning of writing, both literary and non-literary or rhetorical.

Drawing on evaluative data about strategies employed by the writing discipline at Swinburne University of Technology in Melbourne, Australia, which has taught writing online since 2002 and in 2014 had 1,000 subject enrollments per year, this article synthesizes the experiences of its lecturers, tutors, and final-year students in the form of a small-scale qualitative case study narrating the voices of these stakeholders. I present the findings thematically in the shape of a *métissage* (Chambers, Hasebe-Ludt, Hurren, Leggo, & Oberg, 2008). This form both shows the multiplicity of stakeholders’ experiences and foregrounds difference “without essentializing it or erasing it, while simultaneously locating points of affinity” (p. 142). Through a nuanced narrating of my analysis, I bring out new understandings about the

roles of community and identity in teaching and insights into teaching and learning writing online are highlighted through the process of bringing together/*métissage*.

One aspect of this *métissage* is the understanding that many of the assumptions that inform the study, and indeed lead to the formation of the line of enquiry, are inevitable results of lecturer–researchers’ experiences and observations rather than an empirical needs analysis. Self-reflection, observation, and analysis are rich contributors to academic knowing in autoethnography (Chang, 2008) and voice-centered methodology (Mauthner & Doucet, 2003), two methodologies this study aligns with. My knowledge of the students’ textual development across the program is embodied in my own instructor’s journal. The assumptions that I present in my introductory sections, then, are mirrors of my experience and observations as an experienced e-lecturer in writing. They draw inextricably on my own “knowing” as data as I describe the origins of this study to evoke Donald Polkinghorne (1998). Narrating, Laurel Richardson argued in 1990, is unavoidable in academic writing, and I narrate both in this preamble and in my presentation of findings in the spirit of *métissage*. The academic text you now read is, like any academic text, a bricolage of “the scholarly, the anecdotal . . . and the autobiographical” (Arnold, 2011, p. 66). With Polkinghorne, I contend that narratives, such as my own, contain, or even are, people’s identities, and that these are constructed by voices that writers create and regulate to speak and articulate those “ways of being” Gee (1996) described (p. 3).

This experience, and that of Warnock (2009), suggests that successful delivery of online writing programs depends on lecturers (who design courses and create materials) and e-moderators (who deliver them and who comprise lecturers and tutors) understanding the needs and identities (past, present, and imagined) of their students. Such a pedagogy “helps them develop as writers in the truest sense” (Warnock, 2009, p. xii). Successful delivery of an online *creative* writing program also depends on realizing that students’ desire to identify as writers is fundamental. Students enroll in postgraduate writing programs, whether face to face (F2F) or online, with hopes, expectations, and desires related to their investments in belonging to future imagined communities and discovering or developing professional and creative voices. The following paragraphs unpack the freight of these three key terms.

The term *investment*—I’ve used it a number of times already—needs clarifying. The poststructuralist economic metaphor of learner investment (Bourdieu, 1986; Norton, 2000; Pittaway, 2004) is a way of conceptualizing motivation beyond the intrinsic–extrinsic binary in terms of the development of identities that are enhanced through access to the powerful language of privileged discourses. Writing learners’ investment is tied to an imagined desire to belong to a community of writers, to be regarded as a writer. Investing in a community, real or imagined, is a signal of desire for the

social capital of reward, scholastic success, and belonging to future imagined communities (Scott & Johnson, 2005). Pittaway (2004) describes the outcomes of investment-focused pedagogy: “The process has the power to orient . . . practice in a way that truly acknowledges students for the complexity underlying their motivations, desires, and hopes for the future” (p. 216).

In teaching writing online, *investment* needs to consider learners’ desire to explore identity (Ivanic, 1998). It is true, too, that non-literary or academic writing is about representation of self, specifically the projection of an “identity invested with individual authority” (Hyland, 2002, p. 1091). In non-literary genre, “there is strong pressure to take on the identity of a member of that community” (Hyland, 2002, p. 1094). In writing meaningfully in a way that could affect local populations, students in groups still write “to a specific discourse community and with a specific purpose” as in Gillam and Wooden’s (2013) problem/solution assignments. These have at their heart students caring about a shared enterprise—and each other’s individual stakes in it. Most non-literary genres such as reviews or critiques, which our students also write, are, Hyland explains, the shared generic and rhetorical repertoire of particular professional discourse communities. Importantly, those who invest more by sharing repertoire and by commenting on others are theoretically likely to reap more reward: “They build relationships that enable them to learn from each other” (Wenger, 1996).

Investing in the community is a signal of desire for the imagined social capital of reward, scholastic success, and belonging to future *imagined communities* (Scott & Johnson, 2005). The concept of *imagined community* (Anderson, 1983; Kanno & Norton, 2003) references learners’ desired future imagined places of being and belonging whether they be further education, professional memberships, or the entitlement to be called a writer. There are connections between imagined community and desired identity (Lave & Wenger, 1991). The imagined community can be seen as “groups of people, not immediately tangible and accessible, with whom we connect through the power of the imagination” (Kanno & Norton, 2003, p. 241). The concept allows us to understand that investment in present communities (such as the e-community) can affect both future membership in a desired community and the individual education they need to warrant those future memberships.

To utter the term *voice* in relation to writing is to court controversy as we might speak theoretically of “narrative voice” and “authorial voice” and “the voice of the text” (Adelaide, 2007) with a different, more readerly, denotation than my writer-centered use here. We might see “voices,” as post-Bakhtinian new rhetorical genre theory does, as dialogic and dependent upon a readerly–writerly relationship, to paraphrase Roland Barthes (2001) where the reader co-produces the text. Adelaide (2007) refers to it as “the voice that many teachers of creative writing believe needs to be opened up through meditation, or writing morning pages, or

free writing,” and this is surely true of “apprentice” writers but always with the proviso that writing is written to be read by someone. When I asked a student why she wanted to enroll in the program, she replied she wanted to find her “voice.” For her, this was an aspect of writerly identity, of discursive identity: Finding one’s voice is a central investment. At the level of teaching postgraduate writing online, the term *voice* refers to a writer’s natural flow of expression in creating a particular piece, whether it belongs to a literary or non-literary genre. Indubitably, it comes in part from our reading: “We try out writers we like, we imitate them, we fall in love with them” (Adelaide, 2007). Poststructuralist interest in intertextuality tells us other voices influence our own, but so too does where we write and what this does to our creativity. Writers find their voice when the conditions in which they work allow them to reach what Csikszentmihalyi (1988, 1997) called “optimal experience.” This is a state achieved by individuals with perseverance, flexibility, and curiosity and synonymous with the holistic, intrinsically motivated and all-absorbing concept of *flow*. When our words flow, our voices sing the most in tune. “Voices,” then, are creative and individuating qualities that make an author’s writing unique (Ivanic, 1998). Online composition writing students, as Warnock (2009) argues, can use discussion boards to establish “their own authoritative voices” (p. 70), a strategy Gillam and Wooden (2013) find emerges at a group level as well as at an individual one.

The Challenge of Teaching (Creative) Writing Online

The reality of teaching and learning online places practical challenges on the achievement of voice and “voice makes you exposed and vulnerable, and . . . expressing your own voice can be painful” (Warnock, 2009, p. 1, speaking of *teachers’* establishing voices). In a study of creative writing workshops, Stephanie Vanderslice (2006) says students build individual “voices” by doing and discussing. Workshopping, the signature pedagogy of the creative writing discipline, occurs ordinarily in an embodied, physical, geographically defined, “safe house” CoP. Resource-intensive, it requires tutor, space, texts, and the multiple voices of the community of students who comprise the class to interpret and evaluate the shared repertoire of the group and depend on the guru-like status of the lecturer, who is also a practitioner.

Students enrolling in master’s-level e-classes may be time poor and geographically remote (Andrew, 2010; Islam & Ferdowski, 2014). The challenge of geography means that many are unable to access macroenvironments like writers’ workshops or literary guilds where workshopping might happen; but, as Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi (1997) might argue, the home-based microenvironment of the online communities offers possibilities for creativity. Furthermore, as Wenger (2006) notes, “communities are not limited by formal

structures: they create connections among people across organizational and geographic boundaries.” In an e-program, students have virtual access to each other and the e-moderator. This separation from the possibility of F2F negotiation of writerly voice leads to the pedagogic challenge of having to develop identities through interaction with the virtual CoP supervised by the tutor/e-moderator (Salmon, 2000). As Letizia Guglielmo (2009) articulated the challenge for first-year online writing students,

In the exclusively online writing course . . . opportunity for spontaneous community is limited or, perhaps, nonexistent and inevitably impacts the students’ experiences and potentially their development as writers and thinkers.

For e-moderators, there is a challenge involving convincing and encouraging students to invest in learning that draws on peer support through the sharing of repertoire via a learning management system (LMS). As Guglielmo (2009) also notes, writing students may enroll expecting a virtual equivalent of a F2F workshop with a synchronous component where the tutor “speaks” with each student. Clearly, such an idea is unsustainable for regular classwork and synchronous deliveries across time zones are logistically complex. E-moderators are challenged to convince students that they can learn collaboratively by creating online partnerships, *e-critical friendships*. They facilitate “the *efficient* sharing of writing” (Warnock, 2009, p. 69). To paraphrase Guglielmo, asynchronous discussion boards can become central to instructors’ goal to foster participation and “shape the wider community.” Through the action of fostering, students can shape e-communities of writers that facilitate their learning in a student-centered and empowering way. In other words, the fact that the students share a joint enterprise can be harnessed as an asset in encouraging them to share repertoire.

In teacher education, *critical friendship* refers to peers/fellow practitioners engaging with each other communicatively, mutually, questioningly, reflectively in a common goal of self-improvement (Hatton & Smith, 2005). The efficacy of the “critical friends group technique” has also been examined in Vietnamese teacher education where Vo and Nguyen (2009) argue that it empowers fellow practitioners as “observers of practice” (p. 205). These insights from teacher education apply to online communities of learners in postgraduate writing. What is true for communities of learners is, as Peter Block (2008) argues, true for communities as a whole: “The essential challenge is to transform the isolation and self-interest within our communities into connectedness and caring for the whole” (p. 1). To encourage mutual engagement among students through dialogue and critical friendship is also to promote the community-building characteristic of pedagogies of hope valorized by Pablo Freire (1998) and bell hooks (2003). It achieves this by offering collaborative online discourse constructions managed by communities of practice and critical friends based around

Freirean problem-posing education. Each week, students respond to a particular “problem” arising from the scaffolded trajectory of the curriculum.

This study shows that if tutors encourage writing students to invest in critical friendship, the impacts will be both social and ontological: Critical friendships can blossom and individual development (of voice and discursive identity) can occur. This encouragement involves promoting critical friendship as an organized, reciprocal exchange of ideas and work for the purposes of improving submissions before they are handed in, and increasing the feeling of belonging to a virtual CoP.

This means building *sense of community*. Davids McMillan and Chavis (1986) see “sense of community” as “a feeling that members have of belonging, a feeling that members matter to one another and the group, and a shared faith that learners’ needs will be met through their commitment to be together” (p. 9). They itemized its elements as *membership*, *influence*, *fulfillment of needs*, and *shared emotional connection*. In another study, Alfred Rovai (2002) identified seven correlates to sense of community: *transactional distance* (psychological distance between instructors and students), *social presence* (instructor visibility), *social equality* (ensuring equal opportunity for “separate” and “connected” voices), *small group activities* (activities in sub-communities, such as the critical friendship exercises), *group facilitation* (the instructional voice maximizing dialogue about community tasks), *teaching style* (level of control exercised in leading learners to autonomy), and *community size* (mentoring requires a community of 12-15 maximum, remembering that a negotiated amount of individual attention is a major source of retention). If tutors establish and maintain communities, students respond positively to learning from peers and tutors (Andrew, 2010). They also find “safe houses” to explore their voice and receive responses to their texts (Beck, 2004; Freiman, 2002; Gillam & Wooden, 2013). As Marcelle Freiman (2002) discovered of online collaboration, “students have confirmed that they feel it is easier to be honest and constructive when providing feedback online.” The elements McMillan and Chavis identify and the correlates Rovai itemizes resonate with the features of the CoP and are crucial to the pedagogy amplified in the next section.

E-Community and Learning Community

Communities, as Anthony Cohen (1985) argued, are constructed by interaction, belonging, and attachment and are sites of “individual and collective” identity (p. 118). Two types of community overlap and fit the environment of teaching and learning postgraduate writing online: *e-community* and *learning community*. In both, the need for a common source of identification, a salient social presence, is crucial (Gunawardena, 1995). E-communities are “groups of people with common interests that communicate regularly, and for

some duration, in an organised way, over the Internet” (Scott & Johnson, 2005, p. 1). Typically, in the LMS (ours was Blackboard), e-communities establish themselves with semi-guided introductions, with and then others open up more candidly as trust builds, socialization occurs, and sense of community starts to develop. Hung and Der-Thanq (2001) assert, “People, forming a community, come together because they are able to identify with something—a need, a common shared goal and identity” (p. 3). As Kanno and Norton (2003) write, “As learners become more adept at community practices, they increase their responsibility in the community and become more active participants” (p. 242).

Learning communities comprise individuals interacting with a common purpose. They share enterprise to gain understanding through instruction, study, and experience by the creation of a social state and condition. Wenger (1998) says that learning communities become “places of identity . . . to the extent they offer a past and a future that can be experienced as a personal trajectory” (p. 215). Brown and Duguid (2000) established three principles for learning communities. In such communities, learning is *demand-driven*, *a social act*, and *an act of identity formation*. While online writing students desire a focus on individual voice and identity, the learning community also provides the Wengerian elements of support and belonging identified by researchers of online communities (Lapointe & Reisetter, 2008; Rovai, 2002; Tu & Corry, 2002).

Clearly, then, the e-communities of postgraduate writing students may be conceptualized as Wengerian CoPs where potentially expert learning occurs through initially peripheral participation and is fostered by critical friendship. When e-moderation is effective, investment in participation and collaboration motivates learners to reach their goals effectively through the forming of strategic alliances. Learning how to access community resources such as peer mentoring and expert supervision can have collective and individual impact on motivation and learning (Lapointe & Reisetter, 2008; Tu & Corry, 2002). Facilitating this is a role of the tutor/e-moderator (Salmon, 2000; Warnock, 2009).

While research in general indicates the value of CoP pedagogy and the current study articulates an instance of this, it is important, too, to consider the drawbacks of learning online and at a distance. In postgraduate contexts, causes of dissatisfaction with online programs are the perfunctoriness of peer interactions and collaborations (Lapointe & Reisetter, 2008) and the lack of immediacy (Gallien & Oomen-Early, 2008). Commonly reported issues in distance delivery such as lack of support services, access to resources or sources of administrative aid (Islam & Ferdowski, 2014) are accommodated by the supportive (and hyperlinked) pedagogical context of the program, where tutors and administrators can be contacted by e-mail or mobile. There is also evidence that some learners choosing online learning may be psychosocially isolationist by preference (Caplan, 2003; Rovai, 2002), making them poorly disposed to CoP pedagogies. Regardless of the drawbacks, the majority of studies suggest that

e-learning can harness the potential of e-communities (Freiman, 2002; Gillam & Wooden, 2013; Guglielmo, 2009; Hung & Der-Thang, 2001; Islam & Ferdowski, 2014; Scott & Johnson, 2005; Tu & Corry, 2002; Warnock, 2009).

Background

This study involves data from both tutors and graduating students. The latter have completed 12 units of an MA over a 2- to 3-year period and become accustomed to the critical friendship. All tutors attend institutional professional development sessions on e-learning as well as participating in F2F workshops organized by unit conveners to discuss students' cases and complete moderation and quality assurance formalities. These occur four times per year at the culmination of each 12-week online semester. While there are 12 units within the postgraduate degree, and all tutors have specialized areas (such as digital composition and non-alphabetic representation or historical and real-life writing), all tutors apply and reflect on the signature critical friends pedagogy outlined in this study. The 10 e-moderators who responded to questionnaires are experienced practitioners who find online teaching flexibly suited to their schedules as well as their pedagogical beliefs. Students, including the 10 graduating students who wrote reflective memoranda for this study, come from diverse backgrounds with many mid-career professionals (re)discovering writing as a means of self-expression and professional development.

The program begins with "Critical friends," a unit requiring individuals to collaborate on assessed texts both literary and non-literary. The program organizers encourage each tutor to teach the germinal unit "Critical friends" early in their employment period. The program units are sequenced in a way to allow specializations such as digital, non-alphabetic writing or screenplay writing. Pedagogically, nurturing a critical sensibility is as crucial as teaching the details of good writing and is a function of workshoping (Vanderslice, 2006). As mentioned earlier, "critical friendship" involves giving and receiving feedback with individuals contributing to and drawing from the repertoire of the e-community. As with Gillam and Wooden's (2013) pedagogical intervention of group pre-writing, researching, and reviewing expository projects, critically friendly peers function as reviewers and sub-editors, offering feedback at mechanical-discursive, critical-analytic, and reflective levels.

Critical friendships are forged early in a 12-week course between participants within discussion forums. No doubt other media such as texting and facebooking will be involved in the spaces beyond the e-classroom. Tutors encourage students to form allegiances with other group members based on empathetic allegiances and similarities in generic interest or epistemological beliefs. During the first 2 weeks, when students establish their presence as writers and learners through self-introductions in the discussion boards, tutors notice synchronicities and serendipities and indicate them

within the threaded discussion. While students usually find their critical soulmates, tutors also tacitly act as match-makers. This is particularly useful in involving learners who may seem initially peripheral, uncomfortable with the e-environment, lacking in confidence, or feeling intimidated by others' emergent e-identities. Tutors mediate these forums, noticing commonalities and differences between and among students and using these both to consolidate sense of community and to teach by building on the shared repertoire of the emerging community.

Critical friendship develops organically as trust builds and affects interaction in future units, with many students encountering the same friends from unit to unit. By the final unit, they have developed trusting collaborations with particular critical friends through both reviewing others' weekly contributions and participation in peer critiques, virtual simulacra of workshops (Freiman, 2002). Collaboration is the corner-stone of e-community (Palloff & Pratt, 2007), addressing all learning styles and cultures, assisting with deeper knowledge generation, promoting creativity and initiative and allowing shared goals for founding learning communities. Appropriately, Gillam and Wooden (2013) re-cite Palloff and Pratt to emphasize community building superseding content goals as a source of reward in "ecological" class spaces. Such ecological relationships can outlast the lifespan of the community/ecosystem, extending its bounds, providing learners with ongoing social and personal resources.

The backbone of building and maintaining community lies in threaded discussions (Palloff & Pratt, 2007). Provided skilled e-moderation takes place particularly at the socialization stage (Salmon, 2000), discussions help students contribute to the developing e-community, boosting their confidence in their learning and their ability to communicate with others. The asynchronous discussion forum, fueled by cues and associated lectures and hyperlinks/readings, is a site for student assertions, responses, reflections, and exchanges. Tutor/e-moderators regularly facilitate, monitor, and mediate the boards, offering individual (one-to-one) and generic (one-to-many) feedback (a technique known as "weaving"; Salmon, 2000). This encourages fruitful collaborations between participants including the tutor/e-moderator.

Method

Context

The research is a small-scale case study of practices involved in Swinburne's design and delivery of its online master of arts in writing. Swinburne University of Technology is a medium-sized HE university in the east of Melbourne, Australia, and it also serves the vocational sector and has an e-learning arm, Swinburne Online. The study takes place in the HE sector and all of its students hold a postgraduate degree in a cognate discipline. There is, incidentally, no

North American tradition of teaching writing as rhetoric in the Antipodes.

Method and Form

This research is located in the interpretative paradigm and naturalistic in orientation. Methodologically, it qualitative descriptive analysis (Sandelowski, 2000). It is presented, as I said earlier, as *métissage* (Chambers et al., 2008). This presentation understands the social positioning of the researcher/narrator in the study and allows his implicitness in the processes of synthesizing, analyzing, and narrating to be part of the data (Arnold, 2011; Richardson, 1990; Sandelowski, 2000). It seeks to understand the participants and their situations and social learning through their own words and perspectives (Hitchcock & Hughes, 1993). As my data concern identities within communities, my presentation as *métissage* allows the application of Edward Bruner's (1986) distinctions between *life as lived* (what happened), *life as experienced* (affective issues of feeling, responsiveness, emotion, desire), and *life as told* (how I present the narrative). The qualitative data consist of thickly descriptive free-written responses to questionnaires sent to tutors in the program about levels of belonging to community, and reflective memoranda of 300 words by 10 final-year students.

Description of Participants

Tutors. Swinburne's writing tutors are writers in a range of media and genre with MA or PhD degrees and interest in online teaching and e-moderation. Questionnaires and consent forms were sent to our 10 current tutors, and all invitees responded with data comprising narratives of experience. The tutors' responses are holistic, retrospective overviews of their experience as online tutors, rather than evaluations of a specific cohort's performance.

Students. A class of 12 final-year MA students enrolled were invited to submit their Week 12 reflection once all marks had been returned. Ten students gave consent. The reflections are 300-word descriptions of their journeys during the previous 12 weeks, including what learning they would take away and what had helped or hindered their learning. All students are adult learners with an investment in improving their writing for professional, creative, or personal purposes. I indicate the voice with notations such as "Tutor 1-10" or "Student 1-10."

Data collection. Tutors returned their questionnaires by e-mail. The tutors were asked to respond freely to the following questions:

1. What sort of support do students studying writing in an online environment need and find?
2. What, in your view, are some of the ways that we can foster a feeling of community among our online writing students?

3. In what ways do you think the feeling of being part of a community can help online students of writing?

Data Analysis

In line with the interpretative paradigm, a method of content analysis was developed, so that students' reflective comments could be used as triangulation for themes that emerge from questionnaire data from tutors. The method aligns with the qualitative descriptive analysis Sandelowski (1995, 2000) uses to describe and interpret texts generated in nursing. She closely reads the material, identifying key storylines to understand everyday practices, highlighting key phrases "because they make some as yet inchoate sense" (1995, p. 373). Like Sandelowski, I am aware that such readings methodologically align with but epistemologically deviate from Glaserian grounded theory's emphasis on conditional matrices. Sandelowski (2000) presents findings in major categories reflecting their major topics, as I do here.

In my presentation of findings, my need to preserve the language of my subjects disallows my reduction of stories to matrices. Qualitative descriptive analysis has descriptive validity: "Qualitative descriptive studies offer a comprehensive summary of an event in the everyday terms of those events" (Sandelowski, 2000, p. 336) and as such align with case study research. Mine unavoidably has ethnographic, narrative, and phenomenological hues as I report on observed phenomena, value certain words and phrases, and capture critical moments (Sandelowski, 2000). My methods of data analysis and presentation enable me to locate themes that take the form of insider observations, latent concerns, and pedagogical suggestions in tutor and student data. They allow me to be reflexive, and adjust the broad and overarching themes as related ideas connect to them comparatively, semantically, or thematically as storylines emerge. They allow me to present the significant (that is, most quantitatively prevalent) themes descriptively, without essentializing but locating both points of difference and affinity (Chambers et al., 2008).

Limitations

The limitations of small sample size must be acknowledged. Nevertheless, there was a 100% return rate for tutor data and 86% for student data. The interpretative and descriptive presentation of these findings may be seen as being overly selective but reflective of the line of enquiry. For this reason, I complicate the thematic findings by emphasizing how the demands of the individual continually place pressure on the pedagogy of the collective.

Findings

Emerging from the data are the four notional themes described in the following *métissage*.

The Usefulness of Critical Friendship and Community

Many students invest in e-learning because it removes the threat of face to sensitive writerly identities. Student 8 wrote that she could “trust” her collaborators with her writing, although they had “never met,” whereas Student 6 describes being more frank with e-feedback than she would be “in a class.” There is a consensus that sharing experience is a key way to build online community, but that this also affects individuals’ learning about their own creative processes: “My fellow students and critical friends provide reassurance as well as feedback that creativity can be frustrating, sometimes difficult and a never-ending evolution of ideas but it is something we all need to do” (Student 2). Sharing experiences build the fulfillment of needs and shared emotional connection characteristic of “sense of community.”

There is also tutor evidence to suggest how a community approach is “highly constructive”:

Students relax and feel easier, ask more questions, find their own experiences relevant and learn more effectively. Many are amazed at the sense of community that can emerge through the digital environment. For many the sense of community is the most important and valuable aspect of the course. (Tutor 1)

The student and tutor responses consistently value group support and critical friendship. The following is a typical comment: “The critical friendship with [*student name*] spurred me to write more, and become more aware of the good and bad features of my style” (Student 7).

To complicate the themes, a minority of students believes that writing is a solitary occupation and select online learning because of its potential for isolation from sense of community. Student 8, for instance, exhibits this orientation: “One of the most challenging and attractive aspects of being a writer is its solitary nature.” She casts herself as a self-disciplined goal-setter, living away from physical community involvements, happy to develop a voice affected by her reading but not from peers. Student 8 is an exception, though, not the rule. Rather, Student 1 articulates the idea that CoPs counteract her physical isolation:

Working online has sometimes been difficult and yet it is at present, the only way I can attend a university. Working alone can be lonely and create a myopic view of life and art. Aside from this course and its participants, I do not regularly have the chance to discuss ideas, debate, share writing or cultural ideas.

In her case, belonging to the group stimulates the skills necessary to be and become a writer, and critical friendship enables the sharing and cultural exchange necessary for progressing.

To complicate the finding further, tutors are not unanimous on the need for sense of community. Tutor 8 remarks, “I don’t know if a ‘feeling of community’ is necessary for

students to succeed in this course,” adding that the important pedagogical interventions are the exchanges of opinion and responses to queries. Interestingly, the problem most commonly referred to in the collected data was still “isolation.”

The Needs for Agency and Individual Identity

In creative writing, a discipline increasingly methodologically informed by practice-led research (Arnold, 2007), “face” is both about the courage to share and the invested identities imbued in the texts: Students seek validation of their identity texts and of their individuated ways of achieving them. This is not about re-creating generic replicas or enculturation to a given privileged discourse; but about creating emancipatory spaces for supporting individuals’ visions and expression. Student 10 writes, “I am an unorthodox thinker, but my critical friends group admired my work, though I don’t think they liked it as readers.”

The chance to work together as critical friends does not preclude expectations of autonomy or desiring one-to-one relationships with tutors as Brown and Duguid (2000) indicated in emphasizing learning in e-community is an act of identity formation. Despite the group approaches advocated by Salmon (2000), the need for individual feedback remains an issue (Gallien & Oomen-Early, 2008; Islam & Ferdowski, 2014), particularly in the context of a postgraduate program, where expectations of quality feedback are higher, and in a creative writing course where learners are invested in developing their “voices.” Tutor 2 believes that enrollees come psychologically prepared to be autonomous:

When people enrol in a distance-learning course, they assume a high-degree of individual responsibility for their learning, working with prepared materials to learn the terms, concepts, and skills presented.

Three other tutors emphasize that although the tutor is part of the community in a facilitator role, his or her role involves leading the students toward autonomy, or the ability to use the resources of their peers and their worlds without sole reliance on tutors’ words. Clearly, tutors want the learners to find their own voices, rather than to impose it with prescriptive feedback.

In addition to the desirability of agency, there is a sense that learning through participation and interaction offers ontological benefit to learners: “All writing students are by definition centred on their writerly selves” (Tutor 5). I recall, too, the student described earlier whose goal was attaining “voice.” The process of writing in forums observed by critical friends and mediated by the tutor ensures a writerly “journey” (Vogler, 2007) that leads to some production of voice as well as procedural learning about the features of good writing. More specifically, “the course encourages them to think of themselves as writers from day 1. This is an important step in the development of their practice”

(Tutor 1). Identity is linked to a student's investment in their learning of writing.

Moreover, *encouraging* the students' identities is crucial from both tutor and student perspectives:

Feeling the need to be competent requires that the students challenge their beliefs, actions, and imagination, hence a tutor should never do is to criticize students harshly. (Tutor 7)

There is a sense that voices should emerge and be based around students' worldviews and developing imaginations, and that working in a CoP can lead individuals to discover for themselves what these are. Eight of the ten students mention the ontological impact of working with others. The following response is representative:

I have grown so much personally from the degree, which it has transferred across to my writing . . . at the end of this journey I consider myself a writer and for that I am thankful to all as I couldn't have asked for a more concluded result. (Student 10)

The metaphor of *journey* (Vogler, 2007) is one used in creative writing programs. Hence, the first assignment produced in "Critical friends" is titled "Your Writer's Journey" and describes how far individuals have come in terms of developing voice through the collaborative value of interaction with another community member. To summarize this finding, journeying together enables the acknowledgment of individual voices.

Collaboration as a Key Strategy

Collaboration with both peer and tutor emulates the relationship between a professional reader or editor and an apprentice writer, contributing to agency and enacting the CoP model where learners are apprentices to the collective resources of the community, the members of whom have specific talents and investments. While students do not need to be convinced about the expertise of their tutors, they need to invest in peer collaborations:

Tutors need to demonstrate that working collaboratively on each other's texts has mutual benefits for all participants, as well as building writerly autonomy. When they have experienced this in "Critical friends," many students ask for a repeat of their experience in later subjects. (Tutor 3)

All tutors say that "a vibrant group" is the key factor. Three indicate that this is a matter of "luck" as it is in F2F contexts. The crucial factors are the people and their investments: "It's the quality of the people and relationships where the real learning takes place" (Student 10). Clearly, here, we can see the importance of the student investment and of joint enterprise. The success of shared repertoire depends on quality (as opposed to the perfunctory; Lapointe & Reisetter, 2008) being apparent in the forums. Those who think critically and are reflexive in their responses to others

contribute more to the repertoire and the sense of community as well as developing distinct discursive identities. Student 6 describes the "trauma" of losing a trusted critical friend forced to drop out midway through her program. Student 2 writes that part of the capital she gained came from having "been exposed to committed peers who were open in their participation on the discussion board that genuinely enjoyed sharing their vast knowledge and experience." Partaking in critical friendship is an investment that paid for one writer, whose description makes critical friendship seem transcendent:

Along the way, I found companions who shared my passion, my belief, that this way forward is our particular life journey we must brave. We have supported and held out hands to help one another over those seemingly impossible parts of this journey. (Student 4)

The aspect of joint enterprise enables Student 4 to partake in a journey through the rough terrain of typical barriers such as self-doubt, critical uncertainty, and confrontation of the blank page.

Peer collaboration is a sound pedagogical practice but, to add complexity to the pattern, some tutors report that learners still rely on tutor corroboration of peers' ideas, particularly in discussion threads, initially preventing agency. Tutor 6 emphasizes the need for "more helping hands" in the first units. Tutor 2: "The tutor must ultimately moderate discussions and pull the threads together." Tutor 8 emphasizes the need to interact with the tutor to enable a sense of "control." In this regard, an element of group feedback, where the tutor summarizes the main themes week by week as a contribution to shared repertoire, helps build certainty and community at the same time.

Unavoidably, tutor collaboration with individuals also emerges as a key dynamic. The tutors, as might be expected, describe their own role when asked about the challenges facing online writing students:

The tutor can focus on working with students to master the content by using directed discussion to answer questions, stimulate critical reflection, and most importantly, give the student high-quality feedback. (Tutor 8)

Tutors can foster community through many strategies described in the discussion that follows. A key strategy is "asking open questions to draw members to a common line of discussion" (Tutor 2). Tutors identify others:

- "Helping them to feel 'at home' online through reassurance that no question is too 'stupid' to be asked.
- Treating them as equals.
- Sharing of achievements—both student and tutor." (Tutor 6)

Tutor 5 suggests that learning via collaboration could be increased with "more emphasis on joint critique/work

interchange, maybe via a workshop space.” Tutor 9 speaks of “asking open questions to draw members to a common line of discussion.” Teaching online creative writing has far to go in exploiting emergent technologies in creating forums for workshopping.

Investing in Imagined Communities

The majority of learners desire to belong to professional e- and real communities for writers, communities that can only be imagined. Five tutor responses indicated this, with one identifying “vibrant linkages to other writing communities” (Tutor 7) as a key need. Tutor 8 agrees, “Feeling part of the professional writing community can allow students entrée and mentoring in a very competitive and quite nepotistic industry.” There is a strong sense that writing programs should foster links between the student’s present uncertainty and their future desired destinations. “I don’t want to win the Booker prize,” writes Student 2, “but I would like to write forever.” If the tutors are writing practitioners, then the sharing of biographical details can serve as a pedagogical as well as an empathizing function. Leaving the supportive atmosphere of the online community for an as yet unimagined community was an issue for Student 3: “I am reluctant to step beyond familiar, imposed structures of the course into a future in which I must find my own path.” Having a clear sense of being able to belong to an imagined community is an important outcome for many students.

Having tutors who are bridges to communities aids this desire: “Students need to feel that the tutors offer real experience and expertise as well as good online teaching skills” (Tutor 1). Feeling that staff could be a bridge to scholarship and publishing is also important (Tutors 2, 7), as is the use of the forum to post information about competitions and conferences (Tutors 3, 5, 9), both of which represent imagined communities. Another makes the suggestion: “I would recommend that students join a professional organisation, such as the Writers’ Center in their state” (Tutor 8). Three others mention the need for “increased opportunities for inclusion in a published magazine for our writing students & broader community” (Tutor 6). The university runs a refereed journal, *Bukker Tillibul* (since 2004), for its writing students, and publication in this journal represents an aspirational site for sharing the repertoire and continuing the CoP into the professional and academic domains (<http://bukker-tillibul.net/Home.html>).

Many learners regard participation in e-community as a step toward confidence in the written voice, with five learners commenting on increased awareness of their “writerly selves” and five using the metaphor of “journey” to describe learning about these selves. From a tutor’s perspective, the following comment is an apt summary: “The course encourages them to think of themselves as writers from day 1.” Identity, produced as discursive identity in texts which are shared with the community, is the shared repertoire of the CoP in postgraduate e-writing: “Identifying as a ‘writer’ is an

important step in the development of their practice” (Tutor 1). This suggests that students need a “safe house” for mutual discussion and critical friendship.

There is capital, too, in the sociocognitive aspects: Student 5 indicates that her major point of learning is “[keeping] in touch with other writers to exchange feedback and have people to fire off.” Student 3 writes the following: “There is no full stop to this post, in keeping with a lively future anticipated for the critical friendship network formed by our tutorial group.” Six other students echo her sentiment that the critical friendships will last, with Student 4 suggesting that she will create “a Google group.” Student 5 compares the program’s completion to a break up: “I’ve found this post a bit hard to write as I’ve psychologically shifted into break-up mode and haven’t written anything for a few days.” When students are invested in critical friendships and CoPs, they need to find future sites for collaboration, such as Facebook groups. The complexity in this is that students may, like addicts, need the CoP for future endeavors, once more preventing full agency.

Discussion

I asked the question, “What pedagogical strategies enable postgraduate writing students to develop individual discursive identities while harnessing the online environment’s potential for learning via communities of practice?” The findings support Lapointe and Reisetter’s (2008) observation that postgraduate online students *need* a learning community to achieve optimal learning. However, they also support Gallien and Oomen-Early’s (2008) belief that harnessing community potential while offering individual feedback balances learner isolation. We also see, to confirm Brown and Duguid’s (2000) thesis, that learning online in a postgraduate writing CoP is demand-driven, a social act, and an act of identity formation.

The findings demonstrate that the CoP model provides an apposite pedagogical lens for understanding the needs of the postgraduate students and the kinds of interactions that should happen. I support the suggestion that how students unlock this potential depends on their investing in the sub-notions of CoP theory: *mutual engagement*, *joint enterprise*, and *shared repertoire* (Lave & Wenger, 1991), which are applied in the findings section above. Alongside this, there is a need for a supportive, facilitative teaching style integrated toward weaving individual ideas into a collective consensus (Salmon, 2000) and learner agency (which encompasses autonomy; Rovai, 2002). I have discussed these elsewhere (Andrew, 2010). For the purpose of a new audience, and to build on earlier work by Warnock (2009), these are paraphrased to elucidate how e-moderators enact CoP methodology in discussion forums. The tutor/e-moderator could

- Establish chances for students to contribute and ensure that these opportunities are known and accessible to all members

- Clarify from the outset about major assessments and their due dates
- Indicate where to find support/resources related to key assignments, including weekly current weblinks
- Monitor students whose interactions are infrequent or less nuanced in content, and implement strategies for involvement
- Ensure learners understand what is expected (i.e., 250 words per week of your own writing in response to a tutorial question, plus two 100-word responses to others' work)
- Build synchronicities and sympathies between learners and match them into critical friendships
- Encourage community members to respond to the feedback of others and the tutor to trigger iterative and reflexive learning
- Capitalize on members who demonstrate a natural orientation for mentoring skills and desire to help others or who have expertise in particular areas
- Provide a private context for problem-solving and conflict resolution outside the learning community to ensure forums remain ethical, non-contentious sites
- Ensure a balance between group feedback about a topic (Salmon, 2000) and individual feedback about individuals' progress toward their goals
- Scaffold learning through the provision of "ideal" or possible texts for deconstruction, including tutors' own work or those of other community members
- Allow spaces for individuals' discoveries about their writing practice in line with the tenets of practice-led research.

Despite the general thrust of the findings supporting a CoP pedagogy, students value the input of the tutor/e-moderator as a leading source of critical responsiveness (Beck, 2004; Gallien & Oomen-Early, 2008; Salmon, 2000). The above are techniques e-tutors use to achieve this.

Complexly, at the same time what individuals desire is feedback on the development of their voice (from tutor one's perspective). I maintain that critical friendship is a valuable intervention to convey critique, while the "critiquer" benefits from the critical challenge. Learners, on a journey of self, come to value the *collaboration* of peers but require the *corroboration* of tutors. The findings demonstrate that students who invest in critical friendships and acculturate into CoPs are rewarded with sociocultural capital (Bourdieu, 1986) such as social and moral support and access to shared opportunities: information about competitions or lectures. As the student and tutor voices suggest, once participants are socialized and positive about the learning environment, they recognize that they are fellow travelers and offer reassurance and feedback. Without CoP and critical friends pedagogies, students would report isolation and perfunctory non-engaging discussion contributions rather than community-building threads. The self-interest of instrumental motivation would

affect the learning possibilities offered by community building.

Nevertheless, the sub-concepts mutual engagement, joint enterprise, and shared repertoire (Lave & Wenger, 1991) enable e-moderators to conceptualize learners' desires to access imagined communities such as doctoral programs or writers' groups. As Gillam and Wooden's (2013) study would testify, building microcommunities of need into the program in the form of critical friendships enables learners to see the potential of e-community and its members' joint enterprise. This shared repertoire is the knowledge the CoP created and owns. In the findings, tutors and students describe the sense of community achieved partly by e-moderators' applications of Rovai's (2002) "correlates" of sense of community, specifically the tutor's social presence and the need for small group activities through group facilitation and partly by the expanding repertoire of the learners themselves.

Conclusion

This study discussed the experiences and insights of online writing tutors and students in view of the constructivist notions of CoP, sense of community, and imagined communities. The project is informed by poststructural concepts of identity as constitutive *of* and *by* language (Norton, 2000) and of identities as in flux and sites of ongoing struggle (Weedon, 1997), such as those manifested by students in their journeys for voice and their quest for the mantle of "writer." It offers the kind of study Guglielmo's (2009) called for in enabling students to grow as writers and while building critical friendships with peers. This article constitutes a *métissage* contributing to discussion of how CoP pedagogy adds educational, social, and ontological value to teaching and learning (creative) writing online. Yet, it warns that the individual also has expectations and that the development of writerly identities: finding and maintaining individual voices are the main capital sought by postgraduate *creative* writing students rather than finding ways to enculturate to discourse communities.

More specifically, I have described how students report learning not only the technical, mechanical, and rhetorical aspects of text production but also how they learn co-construct, co-interrogate, and co-negotiate texts, both their own and others, via critical friends pedagogy. Students understand how they can benefit from others' readings of their work as well as their readings of the work of peers.

Through mediated critical friendships, a CoP pedagogy contributes to the development of voice. It does this by channeling collaborative feedback, critical friends' responses and the evaluative summations of tutors/e-moderators. The latter contribute by encouraging self-reflexive responses to the (co)negotiation of the final draft of a text, a finding mirrored by Gillam and Wooden's (2013) ecological writing community. Writing students should be encouraged to become aware of and to voice their investments—their motivations, reasons

for participating, desires to write, dreams of belonging, desires for becoming. Voicing self-awareness can be empowering. Sharing it can affect its achievement. Sharing investments can also help tutors use pedagogical strategies such as those listed above. Thus, they can address learner-writer needs while enabling students to see the discursive identities they are fashioning. In view of CoP theory, contributing to the shared repertoire of a community can afford writers windows into their creative and supportive potential as well as providing critically friendly educative, content-driven forums.

One recommendation is that writing programs begin with discussion of individuals' investments. Why are they here? What do they hope to achieve? How do they see writing as a part of their portfolios and as a part of their journeys? What imagined communities do they wish to be part of and what do they need to do to earn membership? Such a discussion cements a group and brings out similarities and differences, opening out possibilities for critical friendship. For a tutor to know what motivates the learners beyond the intrinsic-extrinsic motivation, binary is crucial if they are to enable students to achieve both course outcomes (pass the course) and individual goals (become a writer).

This study suggests that belonging to CoPs can offer long-lasting benefits. Harnessing the potential of critical friendships builds a social aspect into online learning as well as contributing to the attainment of voice and discursive identity. Ultimately, if a student is repeatedly exposed to the critiques of others, of peers, they will, at least theoretically, see the traits and idiosyncrasies of their work independently, and decide how to turn them into virtues and individuating features rather than liabilities. Such practices unite participants by providing insider support, harnessing common goals, encouraging shared discourse, and promoting membership. The communities created become places of identity where students experience learning about their voices as a personal trajectory, while engaging in Gee's (1996) situated social acts such as sharing repertoire by critiquing one another's work or indicating how a text embodies particular theories, philosophies, or ways of thinking and being.

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