

TAKING VIRTUAL POSTGRADUATE STUDIES TO INSIDE JAIL REALITY: SWINBURNE UNIVERSITY AND THE DAME PHYLLIS FROST CENTRE.

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Abstract

This paper looks at the delivery of the Swinburne University of Technology, Lilydale Campus's Master of Arts (Writing) course to inmates at The Dame Phyllis Frost Centre. It explores how the course arises from a teaching philosophy that:

- combines practical and research interest in the students' journey
- develops student-centred teaching strategies and methods that facilitate deep learning as well as a lifelong learning culture expressed in graduate attributes
- has a curriculum base showing a commitment to a flexible learning environment promoting student choice and addressing questions of access and equity
- follows a belief that learning is a potentially transformative and intellectually galvanizing opportunity.

Further, it explores how this online course, which provides virtual reality lectures and tutorials as well as hypertext links to extra readings and activities was adapted to deliver into jail where the internet is unavailable.

This paper tells a story that accords with the work of Gregory Ulmer regarding postmodernist textuality and discourse: it is a 'mystery' displaying how in academic writing there is a combination of the self and the researched, the conscious intellectual semiotic and that arising from storytelling. The paper thus explores and practises how all writing is both personal and mysterious (my story and mystery) whatever its claims to authenticity and depersonalisation

Introduction:

Swinburne University of Technology, Lilydale Campus. is one of the few Universities to have introduced new Arts courses in the 21st century. We offer The Graduate Certificate, Graduate Diploma and Master Arts (Writing) initiated in 2002 are all completely online and asynchronous. Rather than the existing 'Distance Education' model, we have established a 'Virtual Learning Community' model. To achieve this we bring together the four components of WWW, people, print and CD Rom in a virtual online delivery that utilizes the most positive aspects of each.

The courses we have developed are built upon the proposition that all of us are writers in our daily lives. They do not have a narrow focus on either creative or professional writing, but develop synergies between genres of writing offering theoretical, critical and cultural perspectives. The 'how to' of writing in various genres is enabled by global expertise on the hypertext links

Students have access to a subject WWW site with weekly hypertext links and connections to a virtual tutorial consisting of asynchronous discussion threads. There are 'FAQ' and 'Further Materials' buttons. There is a weekly synchronous chatroom or 'virtual coffeeshop' open to all students. The virtual lectures are CD ROM delivered to enable the use of multimedia without the expense of going online. So students 'see' and 'hear' the lecturer as in a lecture theatre situation in which they look up, listen, look down and take notes. The lectures are delivered as words and pictures with voiceovers and stills of the lecturer. A more extensive Word document of between three to five thousand words is available to be printed out.

This writing program was proposed by Professor Barbara van Ernst, our Deputy Vice Chancellor, to enable us at Lilydale to develop further postgraduate courses without being constrained by our outer suburban position. Enabling students to feel comfortable and a part of a global virtual community is a most essential aspect of delivering online courses effectively.

In 2004 we set up a community outreach with the Dame Phyllis Frost Women's Jail. This meant that we had to think of another way of delivering an online virtual course using a real person in real time, yet somehow connected to the other students in their virtual

community of scholars. Thus, the virtual community had to be facilitated by a real tutor. The virtual lectures had to be the Word documents photocopied for each student. The virtual tutorial became a face to face tutorial group with access through the tutor and photocopies she brought in to online discussion threads. We also delivered enrichment library materials donated by staff. Computers were also made available to all writing students by Swinburne Lilydale for access and equity. These computers have been placed in students' cells so that they can write in their own time.

For women who receive life sentences in our prison system, the emotional reactions to long-term incarceration can be varied and complex. Jose-Kampfner terms it an 'existential death' in his stories of 70 women serving long sentences trying to cope with 'life' in prison. Our course provides a window on to another possible present and future life, and some skills to live within prison and to take to outside.

Enabling the women prisoners at The Dame Phyllis Frost Centre to undertake postgraduate studies in writing is congruent with the pledge of the University to reach out to the wider community. It's also more than that: it's part of the galvanizing and potentially transformative nature of education itself. The Melbourne City Mission has a program SWEP that's surveyed in a paper: *The trauma of release: Support for women exiting prison* (Melbourne City Mission June 2002.) displays how complex living skills are required for success but are not provided within prison resources. Our course acts to provide some of the prisoners with some of these complex living skills through writing and reading; through access to academic and practical thinking and through positive learning interactions with one another.

Since 1990 the number of female prisoners has increased by 114%, a 7.5% increase that's higher than the male increase of 5.7%. In mid 2001 there were almost 95,000 women in jail. Within 3 years 58% will be re-arrested, 40% re-convicted and 39% returned to prison for new (17%) or technical (22%) offences. (O'Brien, P. and Adams, J. 2002.)

The impact of the University commitment becomes clear when we hear the student's own voice:

'This subject has been an amazing experience for me. I don't even know where to start! For the first time in two years, I picked up a pen and began writing again. I had been working on a novel since 2001, but I must confess that I had been procrastinating for far too long. I had lost all motivation to write and could find no inspiration. As soon as I began this writing journey (university) I was once again inspired to write. I have been stuck in a rut since moving to the protection unit

in 2002. I think it was due to a combination of my trial and sentencing, which happened in late 2002, the adjustment to the fact that I would be in prison until at least 2012, the separation from my family and from my very life, the fact that I had lost faith and hope and also a few personal conflicts I was having with people in the unit. Beginning this course gave me a new perspective. I learned how to critique and to take criticism of my own work - something I had always feared. I discovered my `writerly self and realized that I am a harsh critic. In module three I didn't understand myself as a writer - I now know that I am very much influenced by what is going on in my own life. I found out that working with a critical friend was probably the best feedback I could get and I learned about critical theories. Critical theories are not something I had thought about before and is something I struggled immensely with in the beginning. But I soon realized that I had gained invaluable knowledge and felt enlightened and even a bit smarter than I otherwise would have. It gave me an interesting insight into life and literature and I am so grateful to have been introduced to this whole new world. In module six, I figured out that I have a passion for historical fiction - something I had never realized before. I thought about research and checklists and gained interesting insight into life and literature and I am so grateful to have been introduced to this whole new world. In module six, I figured out that I have a passion for historical fiction - something I had never realized before. I thought about research and checklists and gained insight and ideas from others. I have read about writing personal reminisces and adolescent fiction writing, and how they work and how they don't work. But the thing I have gained the most from, is the Friday classes with Caroline Beasley and my fellow students. A place where intelligent conversation flows and I am inspired and encouraged to write. A place where I can share ideas without fear of being put down, laughed at or ridiculed. A place where I can be myself without fear of recriminations or jail politics. This journey has been incredible. I have grown and matured unbelievably as a writer and as a person. I am writing my novel again. I am writing better than I ever have in my life!

This young woman, little more than a girl, is locked in protective custody so cannot move freely even around the jail. She makes these very revealing comments about the first subject that she studied. This is a subject called *Critical Friends* developed to enable writers to understand that the stress between criticism and friendship was important to explore if they were to value their own writing and that of others. Rather than criticism being always negative, it engages the student in understanding how positive

criticism can show the way forward. This young woman had never though this way before. For her, criticism was always negative and often led to violent reactions and responses. Now she has a new way of understanding herself and the world around her. She's a very intelligent person and quickly saw how enriching this attitude is and will always be. It's very gratifying for those of us who construct, run, co-ordinate and teach the course.

There has been some community discussion on the rights of prisoners to do university and other courses while in jail. we can only say that everything that we have experienced in delivering this course has been extremely positive for the women, for us as teachers, but, more importantly, for the general community. Most of these women will one day re-enter the wider world. The course that they have undertaken in writing has enabled them to become more insightful about themselves and more culturally aware through their interest in words, language, communication, genre and the many writers that their studies introduce them to...especially themselves. Those who may never leave jail have been given a small window of hope into a very dark world indeed.

British research indicates that there is '...a high level of unmet need with regard to training opportunities available to women. The majority of inmates begin their sentence with no prior qualifications, and therefore prison offers a good potential to redress this ...' (Hamlyn, B. and Lewis, D. 2000) This is what we have aiming for here in Melbourne.

Conceptual Framework

Critical, literary and cultural theories have converged in the late 20th century. They provide a rich prism through which to view the many facets of the new millennium. The major way these theories are utilised is to show how you can 'read' and 'write' each situation and person in life, including self, as a text and how you can enter into dialogue about this.

Thus, 'textuality' and 'discourse' have a new meaning in the late 20th /early 21st centuries. These words and their correlative underlying concepts no longer refer to publications and oracy that clarify and reveal social, personal and cultural givens: they indicate that every aspect of human existence is open to problematisation, to re-thinking.

There is no 'norm', only a variety of texts and discourses and a variety of 'readerly-writing' (Barthes) of them. Some critics see this notion as destructive, others as mere relativism. There is a great deal of resistance to many of these theories as there is to any attempts to apply them to the discrete areas of knowledge in which many academics and thinkers feel comfortable, derive their status and even their living and to which they are committed as gatekeepers of their knowledge areas.

These theories have not just arisen as a result of an idiosyncratic or even mischievous intellectual debate that is essentially selfish and sterile, however. They are a response to many of the imponderables that have affected humans since industrialisation, the growth of capitalism and World War 2. They have become particularly apposite since the introduction of popular and mass media and the new electronic communications technologies. The theories enable us to take a different slant upon a given meaning and hence open up new possibilities and ways of viewing ourselves and our cultures.

It is very useful to practice applying theories to a given example rather than the other way round. This enables us to look at any mediated experience and then 'read against' it by utilising a critical theory. The process gives life to theory itself, showing it to be useful for social understanding and change rather than an abstruse positioning of over-clever academics and intellectuals.

Once we see that we can apply theories to our experiences, we begin to understand the rich complexity of identifying and then problematising the 'givens', 'norms', or the 'natural'. It also becomes clear that 'reading against the cultural text' is not just a theoretical or academic activity. It enhances our culture because it opens up space within the expected, anticipated, authoritative and authoritarian for the new, the unexpected, the personal and the immediate.

It is not too hard to see that such problematisation of the 'given' acts against centralised decision making and the empowerment of the few over the many in a similar manner to the shoring up Nazi Germany under Hitler and his minions and the USSR under Stalin and the *nomenkultur*. It is more difficult to see that the subtext of our own apparently democratic political, judicial and cultural activities can also be problematised.

When we take cultural norms for granted, we are blind to the ways in that they act to empower one group over another or to enact one series of behaviours and activities as 'natural' thereby marginalising as 'unnatural' all who are different from them. The goal of this examination is to bring theories closer to the complexity of real life situations so that we can understand social practice in terms of theories that enable us to see more deeply the complex issues in cultural textuality and discourse. Critical and cultural theories show the search for meaning to be singular and tentative.

We are formed by the cultural constructions in which we live. The social imperatives of our cultural groups are difficult to identify and critique because of our self-construction within the cultural determinants. The intellectual challenge is to step outside the margins of the cultural constructions so as to identify them.

Working against the 'givens' leads to fresh awareness and insight: it is a vehicle of personal and cultural growth.

Writing is a form of inscription that more often supports cultural constructions rather than attempting to explore, define and critique them. The traditional western urge for knowledge has been to define, capture, compartmentalise and place into hierarchies of meaning. Critical and cultural theories provide us with the opportunity to understand the complexity of the relationship between information, knowledge, and wisdom. They also provide an intersection for critiquing the relationship of the individual's construction to the cultural construction.

In his development of the proposition that there is in academic writing the self and the researched, the conscious intellectual knowledge and that arising from storytelling, the contemporary Canadian thinker Gregory Ulmer surveys the idea of 'mystories'. This word encompasses the self, the story and the mystery of this. Ulmer helps us to understand and to accept that donning the straitjacket of conventional academic writing is unnecessary.

What Gregory Ulmer means by his 'mystorical' approach to thinking and research is that a 'mystory' puts under erasure all claims to fact in writing. It shows all writing to be both personal and mysterious (my story and mystery) whatever its claims to authenticity and depersonalisation. It reveals the academic text to be sewn together as a compilation of the scholarly, the anecdotal or popular, and the autobiographical.

Gregory Ulmer's mystorical approach opens up the text to multiple readings because it displays itself as non-authoritative in the conventional sense. The implications of this are manifold. Perhaps the most important - and the most galvanising - is that academic writing and language is now able to be seen as open, explorative and aware of its own evanescent nature in the same way as any other form of written discourse. That is, academic writing can be understood as related to and made up of multiple ways of respecting various personal experiences.

To understand the subtext as well as the text of the culture that is globally dominant, or indeed any culture, we need to be able to read against its 'givens', 'norms' and 'received notions'. (Eagleton, 1989) These display what are the acceptable behaviours and practices of the culture. In reading against these 'givens' we are enabled to see what the power structures of the culture consist of, and who most benefits from them. The culture in which we live has been shown by the growth of critical and cultural theories, in particular feminism and postmodernism, to be constructed by the dominant participants. Contemporary western culture has both created and been created by what is described as a masculinist hegemony. This works to establish a hierarchy within society in

which certain members are privileged over others and by which all members of that society are evaluated or judged. (Elshtain, Flax; Hawkesworth)

Opening up to dynamic thinking about scholarship and knowledge production presents us as academics with new and interesting insights into benchmarks that we may have seen as 'norms' but that can be usefully interrogated for valuable change to occur. This acts to enable us to interrogate those patterns and paradigms that have arisen as 'norms' within the Academy in general and our own areas of research and teaching in particular.

This is obviously pertinent to thinking about and enacting teaching of postgraduate writing courses at The Dame Phyllis Frost Centre. As one of the inmates undertaking the writing course said, jail consists of a certain prescribed security that is a '...situation of infantile dependence, rules regulations covering every aspect of your life; what time you get up, how to make your bed, what time to eat your breakfast, what time you're allowed out to exercise, being locked in your cell...' (Cara)

Visiting the jail: from online to inside:

The jail visit itself is very confronting. Even as a visitor, you quickly lose your identity and sense of self. Checking in means divesting yourself of the outside world, the handbag, the phone and any metal objects. On visits, we feel that we are entering an alien and threatening world.

The Dame Phyllis Frost Centre at Deer Park is in one of the dreariest parts of Melbourne imaginable. You approach it through a vista that is largely given over to long narrow roads, quarries and overgrazed grass plains. Even the sparse beauty of the Australian eucalypt is a rarity.

Prison itself is a great punishment. The educational courses that prisoners do mean that they have a chance to be placed back into the community ready for rehabilitation, itself a great challenge.

We began the Master of Arts (Writing) as a totally online course in 2002. One of our students, subsequently cleared without charges being laid, was unfortunately sent to jail on remand for fraud-related charges. She contacted us through Beth O'Brien, a remarkable education officer from Kangan TAFE. Beth explained that our students felt that she would only retain her sanity if she could continue with her course. This student is a very talented writer, and we are very committed academics, so we set up a date to visit the jail.

We were met by Beth, who we were to come to know as the most outstanding and dedicated teacher I have ever met. Beth was on the Victorian Women's Honour Roll for 2005 for her outstanding services to teaching in jail. Accompanied by a prison guard, she

took us through locked gates and areas into the education rooms. On the way, she explained that the demographic in prison was changing as more women of higher educational background and abilities were being convicted of white collar crimes. She also challenged us, even if it was an unwitting challenge.

Beth said that although many Universities would allow women in prison to do their off-campus distance courses, none actually visited. We thought we could do better than that. Our student was very pleased to see us, and the group that was introduced to us were the students who wanted to develop their education while they were in prison.

In the education unit, Beth provides a wonderful opportunity for women prisoners to extend their educational and hence personal environments. She is employed by Kangan and they allow only their courses, so she comes in on her rostered day off to supervise our students. Beth has organized for appropriate students to undertake our course. Our eTutor, Carolyn Beasley, attends one day a week and tutors students across several subjects. The academics teaching writing at Swinburne visit at least once a term. We are always given a sumptuous lunch and made much of, but it is true that we get as much from these visits and the course delivery in jail as the women themselves.

Because our course is online, the students have to have it adapted, as they cannot use the internet and have only supervised access to other learning opportunities that we take for granted. Carolyn takes print-outs of the lecture materials, other relevant links and articles and the virtual tutorials. As all of the lectures are presented as virtual lectures on CD ROM, the women can access these in the education unit. Many academics at Lilydale have given textbooks and references for the education library.

The course has been transformative. Women without hope, often the victims of domestic violence and worse, have committed serious crimes and are paying for it with their freedom and loss of contact with children and family. The educational opportunities offered by our course have seen the women's behaviour improve generally. This has been noted positively by the jail hierarchy itself. One woman, in for major fraud, has become a very positive leader and role model from being a quite negative force. Another, who is locked up in protective custody, can look beyond the walls of her prison within a prison through the course itself and because the course members and their eTutor are permitted to go to her.

As noted above, the commitment of Swinburne University, Lilydale, to The Dame Phyllis Frost Centre began when one of our postgraduate writing students was placed there on remand and asked the Education Officer to contact us to see she we could

continue what she described as a 'lifesaving' course. Some of the difficulties confronting us were:

- The course was online and access to the internet was forbidden, although CDROMs were allowed and some computer access was available under supervision in the education centre
- Although the demographics of women prisoners has changed over the last decade from 'blue-collar' to 'white collar', the educational facilities were centred on training courses from Kangan TAFE
- There was no history of University interest in delivering face-to-face courses or even of visiting the jail and showing interest in the students
- Women had to work with only a few educational places available
- Many women had writing skills and interests but no undergraduate qualifications although they had undertaken the relevant TAFE courses and had life and industry experience
- The women were keen but there were many obstacles unknown outside jail to stand in the way of their learning journeys
- We needed to ensure that we kept a respectful but necessary 'distance' from the women.

The students are paying for their crimes. To allow them to study is to give them the possibility of a future as they redeem their past. We are informed by the old adage: 'hate the sin, not the sinner'.

The galvanising, transformative and even redemptive nature of creativity.

Original thinking based on creativity is one of the most central and significant of all forms of writing. Creativity is quite chaotic in one sense and orderly in another. It's chaotic because it's essentially non-conformist. It's orderly because the old adage 10% creativity and 90% perspiration is true. Creativity becomes productive through hard work.

Creativity is much discussed in the academic world. Yet paradoxically again, it is not always treasured nor encouraged. This, perhaps, is partly because it's 'messy'. Yet business guru Richard Florida ('the new economic savant') insists in his best selling book *The Rise of the Creative Class* that, 'The creative individual is the "new mainstream", a creature feted by governments and companies smart enough to realise that the age of creativity is upon us.' (Coslovich,, 2004 pp 2-3.)

What is this gift of creativity? Is it only appropriate in creative writing? Sir Keith Robinson, Chair of the British government's National Advisory Committee on Creative and Cultural Education (1998), sees these times as revolutionary ones where creativity is the most important aspect of education not, as was lately the case, conformity. (Time May 16th 2005:10)

Furthermore, he argues that the many companies that currently divide their staff into 'creatives' and 'suits' are misguided. He argues that both education and companies should promote creativity because skills of innovation, communication and team work are becoming more necessary: 'Creativity is possible in all areas of our lives and essential in every area of business. The best companies innovate everywhere: in products, services and everyday systems'.

The gift of creativity is the ability to use the imagination in a rich and rewarding way untrammelled by what is expected and rather enchanted by what is possible. The writing course enables us to see that all forms of communication are based on creativity. In this way it is an important tool for future living and employment in the outside world

In this era of the 'knowledge economy' as the new and dominant model for advanced Western/global society, this era Florida calls 'age of creativity', there is surely great value in emphasising the importance of creative communication skills.

Look, for example, at this information from the 'Employer Satisfaction with Graduate Skills Research Report. Feb 2002. DETYA Evaluations and Investigations Programme Higher Education Division' which stated that, for employers of graduates, creativity and flair was... 'the most important of all skills tested' (viii) and that the other equally important skills were oral business communications and problem solving. At the same time however: 'These three skills show the greatest performance shortfalls, given their importance to employers' (viii)

The following are 'The skill deficiencies most commonly cited by employers themselves':

- Communication skills
- Interpersonal skills
- Understanding business practice
- Independent and critical thinking 'This skill is of great importance to employers and seems to be the skill that most sets apart successful from unsuccessful applicants; in other words, employers value this skill and can find it but it is rare' (viii)

Perhaps unsurprisingly to those of us who are academics who are interested in the intellectual and creative as real life communication: 'The highest rating graduates overall either had arts/humanities/social sciences qualifications or business/administration/economics qualifications...' (ix).

Also: '...employers' main reasons for recruiting graduates (as opposed to non-graduates or those with work experience) were:

- to enable them to train that person in the organisation's procedures;
- because they are more trained/educated/better;
- to provide tomorrow's managers; and
- to introduce new ideas or fresh thinking into the organization.' (ix)

Throughout this report, directly and indirectly, there is emphasis upon the place of communication utilizing the imagination as important to all aspects of business culture. Indeed, in all aspects of our lives, developing an understanding of the importance of the imaginary is important to our social as well as our personal health and well being.

'It is essentially through this intrinsic ability to communicate that human beings have been able to develop their aptitude for imagining, creating and expressing a symbolic universe as well as many other capacities such as seduction, convincing, persuasion, description, explanation and ordering. The rich variety of our symbolic universe bears witness to human beings' intrinsic ability to communicate. And at the heart of communication are spontaneity, innovation, transformation, uncertainty and ambiguity.' (Gilles Willett 'Global Communications: a modern myth? <http://www.unisa.ac.za/dept/press/comca/212/willett.html>

It is in utilising an approach to creativity most clearly seen in fictional storytelling that we can, for example:

- Explore new ideas. We live within the supportive restrictions of a constructed culture. For that to change, we need to be able to transcend its borders that marginalize anything not already known.
- Articulate fantasies. This process permits reflection upon established procedures but even more fruitfully it develops an attitude that asks 'What if?' instead of one that conforms to 'This is so'.
- Develop insights into characterization. It is through stories and storytelling that we meet constructed characters. These teach us about ourselves and others even while they are fictional. They also present us with the opportunity to apply

these 'fictional truths' learnt through storytelling to the stories of our everyday lives and to the nature of the characters who inhabit business, professional and work stages as well as personal arenas.

- Understand the many layered 'messages' of a storyline. Fiction reveals the plots and sub-plots of a story. In doing so it provides us with an understanding that every aspect of our lives is a cultural construction that has both a text and a subtext. Understanding this enables us to reveal subtexts and to understand situations more deeply. We can also enter into the minds and volitions of 'characters' around us to explore many lives that are different from our own and hence to develop empathy for individuals' personal, racial, religious backgrounds and to explore a range of ethnic groups and cultures, thus transcending class and culture.
- Encourage the ear to understand the nuances of speech through dialogue. Subtle nuances of speech reveal subtexts and personal, cultural and social constructions. An awareness of this transcends any system, but gives insights that enable communication and encourage discourse and content analysis. Listening is a prime learning skill at every level of management and workplace endeavour.
- Extend our understandings of human motivations. In any business, institution or workplace, the major asset is the people who work there. Management of people to enable them to bring forward their strengths and overcome their weaknesses is a major strategic goal for any company or institution and is in keeping with personal development.
- Investigate a range of social activities. By developing personal insights and understandings we can meet challenges to our 'given' social 'received notions'. This enables us to think anew and afresh without being hampered by established paradigms and local as well as cultural margins.
- Bring theories and practices together. Of particular importance in higher order thinking, which is, we presume, the domain of higher education, this acts to identify and problematise cultural 'norms' and subtextual ideologies. This enables the interrogation and understanding of social, cultural, personal, and ideological semiotics. It also allows those of us involved in higher education to develop insights into how creative research, thinking, teaching and learning pushes the boundaries and paradigms of the 'givens' of society and culture.

- Identify synergies between the ‘imaginary’ and the ‘real’, thus enable the investigation of stereotypes, the enjoyment of the imaginative inner life and the encouragement our own creative understandings and insights.
- Apply insights developed through creative thinking and research to our inner and lived experiences. This leads to sharing the imaginary with others who think, research, teach, learn, read or write creatively and permits those involved in higher education to become more at ease with creative interactions.
- Understand the strength of words in conveying shared meanings and also to reflect upon the frailty of words in conveying shared meanings.

Pedagogical Implications – the “Mystory” of the Dame Phyllis Frost Learning and Teaching Experience

The experience of delivering the writing course in jail has provided us with valuable insights and experience of learning and teaching. In particular it has taught us the value of flexibility in how we think about the teaching and learning journey both for ourselves and for our students. Perhaps some of the most useful insights have come from the in depth reports sent to us each month by Carolyn Beasley, our etutor, These are a terrific record of how the course and the students are developing. They are practical representations of all of these ideas about creativity, writing, original thinking, learning communities and communication skills.

For example, in one of the reports the e-tutor notes,

“Obviously it would be difficult to provide all [the] subjects to the girls. Problems include having to download and bring into the Centre three subjects worth of materials, the tutor having to be familiar with three lots of course material each week (although I am already familiar with the material from most of these subjects) and the physical logistics of me teaching three different units in two hours.

“I feel the unit offered next should enable work to continue on K’s autobiography and N’s novel. C and D are more flexible with their projects. Given that both K and N are working on pieces based on real life experiences, LPW504 Real Life Writing would work well for them. If we could loosen this unit’s project criteria to include C’s poetry and D’s children writing to redirect their projects to suit the subject it could be a good one to offer if we’re wanting to stick to a 500 level subject. My only concern is that the high profile of C’s crime and her studying of a subject called Real Life Writing may draw undue interest from some parties.”

These reports remind us of Ulmer's belief that donning the straitjacket of conventional academic writing, and traditional academic approaches to pedagogy is unnecessary.

In Ulmer's pedagogical model not only writing, but also the teaching and learning journey, can be both personal and mysterious (my story and mystery, my learning journey) whatever its claims to authenticity and depersonalisation. Just as the mystorical approach reveals the academic text to be sewn together as a compilation of the scholarly, the anecdotal or popular, and the autobiographical, so the learning journey becomes a compilation of the scholarly and the personal. In our experience much of the value of the writing course for the women at the Dame Phyllis Frost Centre has come from what they learned about themselves, and about and from each other. This is graphically illustrated by the following report from Carolyn Beasley about progress in LPW501 Journalism:

“Discussed ideas and structures for their own articles (D is thinking of doing an article on the causes of youth suicide, V doing an article on the rise of incarceration of females, N doing an article relating to her experiences in the protected section of the prison, K doing an article on domestic violence.)”

Clearly our pedagogical model acknowledges the value of critical and cultural theories as well as pedagogical theories. The value of theory for the teacher is that it “...allows - even forces - us to see the ‘big picture’ and makes it possible for us to view our practice and our research from a broader perspective than that envisioned from the murky trenches of our practice. This broader perspective helps us to make connections with the work of others, facilitates coherent frameworks and deeper understanding of our actions, and perhaps most importantly allows us to transfer the experience gained in one context to new experiences and contexts.” (Anderson, 2004:)

This concept of theory is also explored by Biggs (1999: 7) who argues that “every teacher has some kind of implicit theory of teaching” that they apply. However, for Biggs this theory can and should emerge from what Anderson appears to dismiss as “the murky trenches” of practice. Biggs' position is that the application of a teacher's implicit theory should become conscious and that this is best achieved through reflective practice, which allows the recognition and solving of problems and the creation of a framework which can be applied according to need. (Biggs: 1999: 8)

Biggs notes that teaching is a personal experience and that the context – both theoretical and situational – in which each teacher works is different:

“What is effective for this teacher, for that subject, at this level, for those students, may not apply to other teachers, working under their own conditions. Individuals have to work out their own solutions. This requires *reflection*, a theory of teaching to reflect with and a context of experiences as the object of reflection. This process may be structured in the action learning paradigm, in which possible solutions are carefully monitored to gauge their success.” (Biggs, 1999: 9. Italics in original.)

Thus for Biggs, the most effective approach to achieving positive learning outcomes is to use a theoretical approach that has implicit in it the position that the teacher applies the most appropriate pedagogical theory for the situation at hand. In many ways Biggs’ approach to teaching is reflected in Wilson’s (1997) position that effective instructional design is best achieved when it is informed by theory, rather than being rigidly based in it. Wilson argues that while teaching should be informed by theory it should “not slave to it.” Rather, the particular teaching and learning challenge should be identified and the solution informed by theory (Wilson, 1997).

Wilson cites Sfard who believes that while the teacher should be informed by theory it should not act as a barrier to being reflective and reflexive:

“Because no two students have the same needs and no two teachers arrive at their best performance in the same way, theoretical exclusivity and didactic single-mindedness can be trusted to make even the best of educational ideas fail.” (Sfard, 1998, pp. 10-11)

Ramsden (1992) also argues that effective teaching and learning outcomes are more likely to occur when the teacher reflects on practice and applies their insights in an iterative cycle based in an action learning paradigm:

“Becoming skilled at teaching requires developing the ability to deploy a complex theory of teaching in the different contexts relevant to the teaching and learning of that subject matter. A lecturer who is able to do this may be said to have changed his or her understanding of teaching.” (Ramsden, 1992: 110-111)

The strength of the approach to teaching and learning that we have developed lies in its flexibility and the capacity that it offers for greater emphasis to be placed on one or more of its components rather than others. It is precisely the flexibility of the model that has allowed us to offer the writing course in jail, allowing us to emphasise the importance of the personal elements of the model over those which are restricted (ie: the WWW).

We have also used the flexibility of our pedagogical model to meet the needs for a group of three Indigenous students. In this case key adjustments had to be made in terms of delivery to reflect research findings that the preferred Australian Indigenous student learning style emphasizes oral and visual approaches and their learning outcomes are enhanced if learning materials include Indigenous-specific references (Bin Sallik, 1989; Langton, 1981; Arnold et. al, 1998). For these students the emphasis on the printed reading component was reduced, Indigenous-specific web links were included in the subject website and a weekly face-to-face tutorial was arranged to facilitate and assist the students' with their online work.

The strength of our pedagogical approach will be further tested further by how we manage the changed circumstances of some our students. One of the women who started in the writing course while an inmate has now been released to complete her sentence as home detention. She will continue her studies with some restrictions: she can have a computer but cannot access the WWW because of signal interference with her electronic surveillance unit, and her movement from the home is restricted. She will continue to interact with her fellow Dame Phyllis Frost Centre students via Carolyn the etutor who will forward work via mail. She will also be regularly visited by another lecturer to discuss her work and progress.

The student who had already enrolled in the writing course before she was placed on remand and who was the first person we visited in jail has completed the course.

Conclusion

The strength of the pedagogical approach that we have developed comes from its recognition that the relationship of the learner with the teacher is always complex and personal. Further, it recognises that critical and cultural theories are a vital underpinning of pedagogy because teaching and learning are fundamentally cultural acts.

We have found that our pedagogical approach to teaching and learning is transformative for both the teacher and the student. The transformative possibilities for the teacher lies in the potential it brings for reflection on the students' learning journey and the capacity to adjust the delivery mode as required.

For the student the transformative experience comes from the act of learning in a mode that suits their particular learning style and learning context. Perhaps it can best be illustrated by the following response to the writing course from one of the women at the Dame Phyllis Frost Centre:

'I wondered if my life had meaning until I had transformed it into prose. From the course I learned that perhaps my reason for living could not be communicated without the "ellipses and truncated narratives of art". This makes sense to me. It occurs to me that self-realisation, interpretation and self-narration in the context of social commentary, may well be my reason for living. I now write to live, and I now live to write.'

This student also sent the following poem which she allowed us to reproduce:

On starting to think like a writer

'This self as writer is a dreamer and a thief. I am the inhabitant of two worlds simultaneously. One a kind of universal, cosmic consciousness, and the other that of the real and tangible, where I live and breathe and go through the motions like everybody else. But I am not like everybody else.

Beware! I am a thief!

I will steal your 'translucent fragility', your 'quirky smile' and your 'lop-sided grin'. I will purloin the heady perfume of your virtues right from under your nose, and crack the combination to the safe where you secret your darkest thoughts, misdeeds and vices. I will liberate you from the feline qualities of your cat, your witty retorts, your sidelong glances and the whisper of your hair.

No! Nothing is safe, and you won't even know I've been there. For like a thief in the night, I am there and then I'm gone. Returned to my lair in my other, inner world of dreams, where I shall sift and sort through my booty and melt down the precious metals of your memories and make them mine.

But never fear. For I am not like other thieves. Your treasures will be returned to you. Transformed perhaps, but intact. Embedded in the ingots of my output from the world of dreams, you might stumble with surprise upon a jewel you recognize. One you hadn't even known you'd lost. But there it is. A flawed and dimming gem from your own collection. Perhaps a childhood memory now gleaming, bright and polished, adorning a different crown.

Pray don't despise my thievery. For ultimately I return to you something greater than that which I stole. Your lifeless lumps of carbon I restore you as diamonds, now cut and polished and gleaming with the many faceted reflections of a multidimensional universe.'

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