The Writing Collective: a cross-university collaboration between undergraduate creative writing students

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Queensland University of Technology and Southern Cross University

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Abstract:

Online publishing platforms present opportunities for emerging writers to both share their work with an audience and to engage in a critical dialogue with peers. However, the potential of these platforms remains largely untapped in a tertiary education environment, even with the increasing focus on online learning. This paper presents the results of a pilot project that matched undergraduate students at a metropolitan university with students at a regionally based university to use the digital platform Wattpad as a site for creative writing peer critique. We found that while Wattpad presents a number of benefits for students engaging both across universities and online, digital spaces present unique challenges for the critique process. Critiquing often relies on trust and personal bonds in order to be effective, and these can be harder to establish in a digital environment. Wattpad also presents barriers to ease of use and ease of communication. From our perspective as facilitators of the Writing Collective, we examine the successes produced by the collaboration, as well as the drawbacks, and suggest further avenues for research.

Biographical notes:

Alex Philp is a PhD candidate at Queensland University of Technology. Her research examines sister relationships in fiction and the Gothic. Her short fiction has appeared in *Overland*, *The Review of Australian Fiction, Westerly*, and on the *Meanjin* blog, and in 2017 she won the Rachel Funari Prize for Fiction.

Dr Emma Doolan is a lecturer in creative writing at Southern Cross University, NSW. Her research explores Gothic representations of place, particularly in writing about Australia's hinterland regions. She is also interested in modernism, feminism, ecocriticism, pop culture, and creative writing practice. Her practice-led doctoral thesis was completed at Queensland University of Technology in 2017.

Dr Rohan Wilson is a writer, teacher, and critic. He is the author of three novels, *The Roving Party* (2011), *To Name Those Lost* (2014), and *Daughter of Bad Times* (2019). His work has won numerous awards, including the 2011 *Australian*/Vogel's Literary

Award, the 2015 Victorian Premier's Award, and the 2016 Adelaide Festival Award. He lectures in Creative Writing at QUT. His academic research has focused on fiction's difficult relationship with history and the ways in which the Australian novel imagines its connection to the past.

Introduction

The Writing Collective began as a desire among colleagues at two universities, one a large metropolitan institution (Queensland University of Technology in Brisbane, Queensland) and the other a small regional institution (Southern Cross University in Lismore, New South Wales) to expand our students' literary communities outside the classroom by fostering cross-institutional networks in an online community. As an established online creative writing community, Wattpad was an ideal platform to virtually connect students across institutions and, we hoped, with a wider literary community. Wattpad offers a direct connection to the writing and publishing industry as an online publishing platform, and we hoped that by engaging in extra-curricular cross-institutional workshopping on an international public online platform, student participants would begin to see themselves as active members of both a local and global literary community. A key question driving our research was whether Wattpad, which has proven successful in creating a broad online community of writers, was also a suitable platform for fostering a more intimate community between our two universities through online peer critique.

While the tactics, benefits, and challenges of collaboration in a creative writing peer critique learning environment have been rigorously discussed in pedagogical scholarship (Dawson 2004; James 2009; Donnelly 2010), the complexities that arise when collaboration is moved into the digital space remain only partially explored. While there is some evidence to suggest that the 'sharing economy' on sites like Wattpad promotes amateur creativity (Vaade 2017; Ramdarshan Bold 2018), the potential of online publishing platforms as a space for collaboration and critique is unclear. What are the unique challenges and opportunities that Wattpad presents to cross-institutional collaboration for creative writing students from both metro and regional universities? How can undergraduate writing courses make use of digital platforms such as Wattpad when aiming to build a sense of community among writers? How suitable is Wattpad to facilitate creative writing peer critique? We reflect on our experiences as facilitators of the Writing Collective to explore these questions.

Literature review

Traditionally, critiquing in creative writing classrooms takes place in a face-to-face workshop-style environment (see Woods 2002; Dawson 2004; James 2009). This environment largely

derives from the long-standing practice of the 'writing group': a model of collaboration that is recognised as being deep-seated in creative writing (for example, see Donnelly 2010; Wolitzer 2013; Payne 2019). It has also been influenced more recently by the growing implementation of 'writing centre' pedagogy within creative writing undergraduate courses, which aims to facilitate an enduring 'conversation between peers' (Kostelnik 2015: 225). The immense value of critique in particular, and of collaboration in general, for undergraduate writing students is widely documented, and both are embedded within the principles and values of what Lave and Wenger call 'communities of practice' (1991: 98).

Webb and Melrose (2015: 196) argue that establishing trust and personal connections in classrooms is deeply important for creative writing students to feel comfortable 'exposing' their writing. Members of a trusting critique group are more likely to avoid the vague feedback or defensive attitudes that scholars such as Oosta and Hoatlin (2015) identify as common issues with peer critiquing. Strong social relationships are important for undergraduates in all disciplines because such relationships can counteract the stress and difficulty of university (Buote et al 2007: 666). For creative writing undergraduates, strong relationships with other writers are necessary not only for social benefit, but also because as practising writers outside the university they will require a trusted network of peers to share celebration as well as critique in their future creative practice. We believe that one of our roles as teachers of creative writing is to help undergraduate students understand the importance of such networks and begin to establish their own writing communities that will persist beyond their university lives. In an increasingly digital world, and with growing numbers of online creative writing students, it is important to consider new ways of facilitating community and collaboration between online students. New methods and platforms of online collaboration present an opportunity to widen the scope of the creative writing workshop (Rein 2015; Vaade 2017).

If the traditional creative writing workshop is 'mysterious' in nature, 'hotly contested … little understood – and often under-explained' (Vanderslice 2006: 148), then the online creative writing workshop is even more difficult to define and quantify. Online creative writing workshops may take place as part of academic courses of study or within programs offered by writers' centres or other groups. The mode of delivery of online workshops may vary greatly, ranging from video tutorials using Skype, Zoom, or Blackboard Collaborate to back-and-forth responses on discussion boards. As with face-to-face writing workshops, online writing workshops may be instructor-led discussions resembling lectures, followed by practical writing exercises and critiques, or entirely hands-on writing and critique sessions. Private writers' groups will also have their own variations on these themes (see Gere 1987; Rockquemore 2010; Wolitzer 2013; Leach 2014), with activities ranging from critiquing sessions where individual works are read and systematically discussed to 'shut-up-and-write' sessions (see Mewburn et al 2014) where the writing itself is often the key activity. As an alternative or an extension to such models and techniques, the recent rise of online publishing platforms presents an opportunity for such platforms to act as a new site for online writing workshops and peer critique.

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A number of internet publishing platforms have emerged in the last decade as the adoption of mobile devices spurred growth in digital reading. These include writing communities like Scribophile, a site dedicated to providing users with peer critique, or Booksie, where users can self-publish their fiction and poetry online. The biggest and most successful of these online writing communities is Wattpad, a major platform with both a website and mobile app, which has more than 80 million monthly users (Kirkwood 2019). Wattpad was founded in 2006 with the aim of 'removing traditional barriers between readers and writers and building social communities around stories', as well as giving writers a way to reach the growing readership on mobile devices (Wattpad 2012). Wattpad follows a YouTube-like model, where content is uploaded by amateur creators keen on bypassing traditional methods for publication. In contrast to traditional print publishing, online platforms tend to flatten out the difference between amateur and professional writers and it may be the case that 'the crossing of amateur and professional practices defines the digital publishing scene' (Vaade 2017: 48). Platforms of this model provide a useful space for students to become more familiar with the 'organizational, collaborative, and economic practices that are blurring the lines between amateur identity and professional activity' (Vaade 2017: 48). At the very least, the rise of Wattpad suggests that there is a 'demand for authorship without the intervention from publishers' (Ramdarshan Bold 2018: 118).

There are, however, a number of pitfalls present in using digital technology for a community of practice such as the Writing Collective. One study linked high levels of student attrition to a lack of engagement with blended learning technology, as students encounter barriers to learning that cause disengagement, rather than engagement, especially among learners who are unfamiliar with a new platform (Shaw et al 2016). Further to this, as Rein (2015: 94) points out, something important is lost from the peer critiquing process when 'students respond only to the work, and not each other'. The problem then becomes one of effective communication through a technological barrier, as some participants foster lively discussion even with these barriers in place, while others find the experience too limiting and avoid it altogether (Rein 2015).

Similar problems are evident in the literature on online learning generally and online writing groups or workshops specifically and these raise several key design principles and challenges relevant to the Writing Collective. Participant engagement and a sense of community are commonly identified as both of chief importance and also recurring challenges in creating successful online groups, whether of students or writers in general. Baum and McPherson suggest that it is foremost 'being in a social environment that contributes to student learning' (2019: 239). Jackson (drawing on Oliphant & Branch-Mueller 2016) notes that online students achieving the same learning outcomes as on-campus students 'depends on developing a sense of community and social connections' (2019: np). The challenge is to develop this sense of community and a social environment in online spaces. Writing teachers may assume (perhaps erroneously) that students in face-to-face environments will 'naturally' connect and form creative communities. However, 'students in online classes have often reported a sense of isolation' (Girardi 2016: 60). Online students may feel disconnected and unsupported compared to their on-campus peers, may achieve lower grades, and may be more likely to

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withdraw from their course of study (Baum & McPherson 2019: 239). Furthermore, at-risk students (those from underprivileged class, ethnic, or racial backgrounds and those who are academically underprepared) are likely to 'suffer most from the loss of personal contact with faculty and other students' (Baum & McPherson 2019: 239) in online environments. Facilitators must make efforts to overcome this barrier to human interaction – as some have (see Brien & Ellison 2019) – within online spaces. Online teaching requires 'additional time … spent on fostering a learning community' (Girardi 2016: 60). Research into online learning communities has revealed that 'technology [can] be instrumental in forming the community students innately desire, or using it in the classroom [can] prove prohibitive, depending on prior expertise' (Girardi 2016: 60).

A key area of debate around the question of improving online learners' engagement and success is synchronous (for example, video tutorials that students attend at set times) versus asynchronous (for example, communication in students' own time via discussion boards or email) modes of participation. As Girardi (2016: 61) summarises:

> [s]ome scholars, such as Alvin Wang and Michael Newlin, have argued for synchronous discussion opportunities to build community (Wang and Newlin 2001) while others such as J. E. Aitken and Leonard Shedletsky advocated for asynchronous tools such as email and discussion boards. (Aitken & Shedletsky 2002)

Flexibility is usually considered an advantage of online learning, as students with work, parenting, or other responsibilities can determine their own study hours and work asynchronously with peers and instructors. However, evidence also suggests that providing at least some opportunities for synchronous participation contributes to student satisfaction and engagement. A pilot study of online writers' groups for doctoral students studying externally at an Australian university found that opportunities for synchronous participation (for example, Skype meetings scheduled at a time when all group members could attend) correlated with increased student satisfaction when compared with asynchronous modes of communication such as email (Kozar & Lum 2015). Likewise, Girardi (2016) identifies providing opportunities for students to interact with the instructor and with peers in 'real time' via phone calls and scheduled text chats as crucial to the success of her online teaching practice. In particular, early opportunities for synchronous participation appear to be important for establishing rapport, trust, and a sense of community among online groups at the outset. Groups may be expected to become more self-directed and less dependent on facilitators to organise synchronous participation opportunities once the ice is broken and groups are established. The Writing Collective was designed around an asynchronous model, with discussions occurring in the Facebook group and in group members' comments on Wattpad drafts – a decision we reflect upon in our discussion.

A related factor identified across the literature as contributing to the success of online groups is the degree of social presence (Jackson 2019) and engagement of online facilitators or instructors (Howe & van Wig 2017; Khan et al 2017). Participants in online groups, especially

student groups, may engage in three ways: student-content, student-instructor, and student-student (Xiao cited in Jackson 2019). The Writing Collective relied on student-student engagement; however, the literature suggests that the student-instructor relationship is of key importance. There is tension around this point. Some advocate for purely student-centred writing spaces without the need of teachers as facilitators. Kozar and Lum's (2015) findings were ambivalent in regard to the expert facilitator's role in successful online doctoral writing groups; the semi-facilitated and unfacilitated groups in the study reported higher levels of satisfaction than the fully facilitated group. However, participants in the Writing Collective are undergraduate rather than doctoral students and therefore may benefit from more hands-on facilitation or the increased social presence and modelling of the facilitators, in keeping with the literature on online learning more generally. On reflecting upon the pilot Writing Collective, we believe that a relatively strong instructor presence *was* necessary to successfully facilitate peer critique between students on Wattpad.

It is important to briefly acknowledge online communities and online collaboration separate to online learning pedagogy. The Writing Collective is tied to tertiary institutions and participants are enrolled in creative writing courses; however, the project is an extra-curricular activity and not tied to curriculum, learning outcomes, or assessment. Scholarship on online communities takes place in a variety of contexts; of particular use to this study is Henry Jenkins's work on participatory culture (particularly the recent 2019 publication of interviews from his blog), as well as scholarship discussing online communities of practice. While early scholarship on communities of practice focused on face-to-face or in-person communities (Lave & Wenger 1991; Wenger 1998), substantial literature has since emerged on the operation of online communities (for example, see Angouri 2016). Coinciding with arguments in the literature for online learning, trust and connection are important for vibrant online communities of practice (Barnett et al 2012). As in creative writing critique groups, in online communities of practice it is important for members to feel comfortable engaging in knowledge sharing (Ardichvili 2008). In creating the Writing Collective, we aimed to achieve Chiu, Hsu, and Wang's understanding of an online (or in their terminology, virtual) community: an online social network 'in which people with common interests, goals, or practices interact to share information and knowledge, and engage in social interactions' (2006: 1880). It is important to remember that learning and knowledge sharing is only a partial motivation for people joining online communities; members also treat online communities as a place to seek support and a sense of belongingness (Chiu, Hsu & Wang 2006: 1874). Because of this, establishing a sense of community is a necessary condition for enhancing 'the likelihood of members' contribution and participation in a virtual community' (Chiu, Hsu & Wang 2006: 1875). This principle guided our approach to the Writing Collective, where building a sense of community between students was a core aim.

Arasaratnam-Smith and Northcote (2017) reiterate this principle. For Arasaratnam-Smith and Northcote, facilitating successful online collaborations involves a persistent 'element of relationship to community' (2017: 191). Just as is the case with effective online learning, where 'simply placing students into groups is unlikely to result in collaboration by itself' (Halthorn & Ingram 2002: 33), online collaborations in any context require relationship building.

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Halthorn and Ingram define online collaboration as 'the interdependence of the group participants as they share unique ideas and experiences' (2002: 33). Writing groups are by nature interdependent: participants are both writers of their own work, and editors of other writers' work. In asking the participants of the Writing Collective to engage in peer critique – where students work together toward the common goal of improving a written piece – we hoped to facilitate collaboration. Facilitating critical dialogue among peers to create a sense of belonging in a cross-university literary community necessarily involves learning. While Writing Collective participants do not achieve learning outcomes officially tied to their university course, they do gain valuable knowledge about workshopping, about author and editor relations, and about the opportunities available to them through online publishing platforms like Wattpad. Therefore, concepts of online communities, online collaboration, and online learning are not easily separated when it comes to the aims of the Writing Collective. Literature from these areas – along with others explored in this review – informed how we conceptualise and reflect upon the project. Before discussing our findings and reflections, the following section outlines our approach to designing the inaugural iteration of the Writing Collective.

Project design

The preliminary model for the Writing Collective was simple. We began by adding students to a private Facebook group which we used to communicate key information, including how-to videos and information about using Wattpad. We then allocated students to smaller (4–5 person) critique groups based on the genre of their current works-in-progress. Students were asked to upload their drafts to Wattpad, and each group was invited to determine their own mode of interaction and communication, for example regular Skype meetings, email updates, or direct comments on Wattpad. The pilot project ran for 11 weeks, from 9 August to 25 October 2019; however, we encouraged students to keep in contact with their groups and to keep working on their stories after this point.

The 2019 Writing Collective was entirely voluntary and not tied to any coursework or assessment, so we did not impose deadlines or requirements. We were mindful that students were also undertaking full study loads during this period and would need to prioritise class work and assessment tasks. Therefore, instead of imposing fixed deadlines we asked students to indicate on their expression of interest forms their commitment to the project and their groups for the duration. As facilitators, we constructed a loose timetable with recommended dates for completing workshopping rounds. We posted the timetable in the Facebook group along with regular reminders and content such as links to author interviews and examples of well-known writing collectives (for example, the Bloomsbury group) in order to spark interest and maintain momentum in the project. For extra motivation, we also partnered with two university-affiliated literary journals who agreed to publish two pieces selected by the facilitators at the end of the project.

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Our call for participants was enthusiastically received and we began the project with 26 students from QUT and 4 from SCU (a ratio that roughly reflects the different sizes of the institutions). Due to this ratio, each critique group had a greater number of QUT students than SCU students. Students were demographically diverse, with a mix of genders, and both school-leaver and mature-aged students from urban and rural backgrounds. SCU students were familiar with online peer critiquing and engagement as students at this regional university usually undertake at least a portion, if not all, of their studies online. In contrast, students from QUT undertake the majority of their studies in a face-to-face environment with only a small amount of online content (for example, the option of viewing recorded lectures rather than attending on campus), but their workshopping activities have predominantly taken place face-to-face. However, QUT students are on average younger and more likely to be 'digital natives'. For this iteration of the Writing Collective, we did not conduct formal interviews with students nor collect feedback or data from student surveys, although this is an aim for future iterations. This pilot project was a chance for us, as facilitators, to test-run the model and identify areas to develop and explore in future versions. In particular we wanted to observe the possibilities and limitations of using Wattpad for undergraduate peer-critique.

Discussion

Successes

Students embraced the Writing Collective in large numbers. We had a total of 30 students across both universities sign on to the program, a number that far exceeded our initial estimates. In order to help us to overcome some of the pitfalls we knew we would encounter, such as the difficulty of establishing dialogue between students, the barrier of learning a new platform, and the discomfort students may feel when sharing their work with strangers, we opted to use Facebook, a familiar platform for most, as a home base for the Writing Collective. Studies have found that Facebook can be used to increase student engagement (Baran 2010; Alejandre et al 2012) and to encourage connection and collaboration between peers (de Villiers 2020), and our own experience was similar to an extent. Creating a sense of community and belonging among the students was much more straightforward on Facebook than it was on Wattpad. We could stimulate discussion by posting articles and suggestions for the group. We could share links to videos that explained how Wattpad operated and why it was a useful platform for writers. In short, we could get past some of Wattpad's shortcomings by making use of a social media platform that students were already comfortable using. The dangers of introducing too much technology or too many digital platforms for students is well-documented by scholars such as Girardi (2016), and we were conscious of this in our design for the Writing Collective.

As the project gathered steam, we found several other benefits to using this split model as well. Facebook has scheduling tools that allow moderators to schedule posts to appear at a certain time and date. This made it much easier for us to manage our workload with the project, as we could prepare posts in bulk rather than maintaining a consistent online presence. It was also the case that students quickly made contact with each other and began sharing thoughts and ideas

in a dialogue. This was facilitated by the fact that students could browse each other's Facebook profiles and become familiar with other students. Further to that, as Facebook is not linked to the university in any way, and membership is not reliant on being a student, the groups could continue to operate after the end of the program as long as students took the initiative to maintain contact, which we believed was a key benefit.

While the transition from Facebook to Wattpad was difficult for some students, we found that more than half of the students posted at least one complete chapter of their work to Wattpad within the timeframe we suggested. These students created accounts, made book covers, and wrote blurbs for their work. By the project's end, many of the works published by students had attracted a number of readers outside the Writing Collective. One work of young adult fantasy posted by a participant had attracted almost 200 views. This is a sizable audience for an amateur writer publishing their first work and it reinforced for us that Wattpad has untapped potential for educators looking to introduce their students to the habits of professional writers.

Challenges

Despite our successes, we also experienced several challenges which raise important questions about the design of the Writing Collective, about students connecting in a digital space, and about Wattpad as a platform to facilitate peer critique. We found that while over half the participants posted their stories to Wattpad, very few actually commented on each other's stories. More students engaged on Facebook than on Wattpad and, despite our regular posts and suggested timeframes, engagement even dipped on Facebook toward the end of the pilot period and as the loose 'deadlines' for workshopping rounds approached. We had hoped that our use of recommended timeframes would be appreciated by students who had busy lives and deserved the autonomy to decide how their groups would operate; as established earlier, such flexibility is noted as a key benefit of online platforms. However, some students struggled to agree on workshopping processes, few stepped forward to act as the 'leader' or 'organiser' of their groups, and students only partially engaged in peer critique (for example, only critiquing within the first round of workshopping, or only some group members receiving critiques). These factors resulted in – or are reflective of – a lack of engagement among some students.

Our experience points to the importance of creating opportunities for synchronous as well as asynchronous participation (Kozar & Lum 2015; Girardi 2016) and of having a strong instructor presence in online groups (Jackson 2019). As facilitators, we consciously stepped back from having a strong presence in the individual peer critique groups, but we now realise that we may need to take stronger leadership roles rather than simply facilitator roles in future iterations – particularly in the beginning stages of the project. If we had provided opportunities for students to meet via Zoom (for example) in the first week, or if we had made a point of dropping in on students' stories and adding our own comments, then the project may have felt livelier. However, it is also important to note that one challenge for us as facilitators was that it was difficult to monitor exactly how students were engaging with each other. For example, rather than posting in the Facebook group, perhaps students were using Facebook Messenger to send private group messages? Maybe they had exchanged phone numbers and were texting?

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By encouraging students to adopt bespoke modes of communication and group work, we had reduced our ability to monitor the project. While comments on Wattpad and in the Facebook group provide some indication of the level of engagement within individual groups, this is by no means a well-drawn picture of how each group collaborated. This is a limitation in the design of the Writing Collective and in using digital platforms (Wattpad, Facebook) for this type of project, and potential pathways to address this limitation in future iterations of the Writing Collective are discussed in the following section. While the apparent lack of participant engagement could have been due to the need for more scaffolded activities or enforced expectations, we also believe that a contributing factor was the complexities of workshopping in the digital space and particularly on Wattpad.

Wattpad is not a platform that is frequently integrated in either institution's curriculum or that many of our students already knew how to use. While we used Facebook as our home base in part to combat this and provided students with 'how to use Wattpad' videos, the majority of student engagement on Facebook after we launched the project was a series of questions about how to use Wattpad. For our students, the chore of having to learn how to use Wattpad made the platform appear like an obstacle to their workshopping rather than a facilitator of it. As such, our experience aligned with the scholarship introduced earlier: that there can be diminished engagement among learners when they have to navigate new digital platforms (Shaw et al 2016). Wattpad was particularly troubling for those students who anecdotally reported frequently having to engage with and understand new technological platforms in their learning.

Several students also questioned whether uploading their writing to Wattpad would make it 'published'. As many students were working on pieces that would be submitted as assessment items in our courses and therefore be subject to self-plagiarism checks through tools such as Turnitin, this was a pertinent question to ask. While we reassured students that their markers were aware of their involvement in the Writing Collective, having to consider this at all encouraged students to question whether Wattpad was the most appropriate platform for our purposes. Additionally, uploading their pieces to an online publishing platform felt 'high stakes' and as if they were 'on show' to professionals in the writing industry and as such students had a further level of resistance toward the platform. Students could have felt that their writing was not 'good enough' or that commenting on another student's story with critique was highlighting the story's 'flaws' to a professional community. Such perceptions are hardly conducive to cultivating the confidence of undergraduate creative writers in their developing practice. In this way, part of our rationale for choosing Wattpad – that it was an industry platform and introduced students to the habits of professional writers – was double-edged. Further still, the 'comment' feature on Wattpad restricted the ways in which the students could have engaged in workshopping. Online commenting is often a 'limited, monological' (Rein 2015: 94) method of critique and we found this especially so on Wattpad. Students could not engage in a continuous dialogue where they 'bounced off' each other; they also had to fit their comments within character restrictions which potentially diminished their potential to give thoughtful, in-depth feedback. These limitations meant that Wattpad was a difficult platform

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for students in the Writing Collective to develop a trusting, vibrant, and deep critical dialogue with each other.

Additionally, despite the digital space often being seen as a space for inclusion, it can also be exclusionary. Our project relied on students having internet (which can be unreliable in certain geographic locations or made difficult by financial constraints), as well as both skills-based and affective competencies such as digital literacy skills and feeling comfortable with various online platforms. In particular, two students did not feel comfortable using Facebook due to privacy concerns and did not have Facebook profiles. While we used email instead to connect these students with their peers, these students could not engage in the community-building aspects of the Writing Collective – which were initiated and largely took place on Facebook – and as such struggled to develop strong personal connections with their peers. Like Wattpad, while Facebook has some productive benefits it also has several drawbacks. In future iterations of the Writing Collective, alternative platforms such as Slack may prove more acceptable to the majority of students; however, introducing another largely unfamiliar site may also create a further barrier to access for some students.

The digital space presented further difficulties for students creating personal connections. As established earlier, critiquing often relies on trust and personal bonds in order to be effective. Students found it difficult to connect online without a face-to-face icebreaker activity (an activity which QUT students were used to). Webb and Melrose (2015: 196) describe how they have encouraged communities of practice within their classrooms:

> [we] organise the teaching room into clusters of desks, and when, during the first class, the students have seated themselves, inform each cluster that they are a group for this semester or year (or longer), and that this group will be the first point for reference for each other for critique, for evaluation, reflection, and support.

While this can be an effective method in classrooms, this way of relating to each other physically is rarely available in the digital space, and particularly not within the common ways that Facebook or Wattpad are used. We noticed that students who already knew each other in class felt more comfortable creating connections and were engaged for longer in the aims of the project – but not necessarily in the online spaces we had provided. For example, two students who were taking the same creative writing unit at QUT often came to class early or stayed late and provided peer critique for their Wattpad stories. These QUT students evidently found it more convenient or comfortable to undertake their workshopping in person, rather than online. This suggests that the Writing Collective still has some way to go in establishing user-friendly online spaces and welcoming virtual communities of practice that are able to effectively stand in for the face-to-face experience. This observation demonstrates the deep importance of initiating social connection and trust among students prior to workshopping. It also gives weight to the arguments that 'real time', synchronous interactions might assist students to connect in a digital space and suggests that further examining why shared physical spaces are often effective in facilitating peer connections will be crucial to find new strategies

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for digital spaces. Further, our observation highlights the importance of students establishing personal connections particularly for cross-institutional collaboration within a digital space. Without strong social connections and trust, students are less likely to engage in peer critique or are more likely to only properly engage with students they already have a connection with: that is, students from their own institution. This dilutes the opportunity for students to establish a wider literary network.

Conclusion

As we develop and expand the Writing Collective in the future, the results of the pilot project will inform our project design. Key challenges emerged around engagement and participation, the digital platforms at our disposal, and our ability to accurately track and evaluate students' experience of the project.

As the literature suggests, a greater social presence from the facilitators may contribute to increased student participation, as facilitators can model the codes of conduct within unfamiliar online spaces, and therefore ease students' anxiety about 'getting it wrong'. Scheduling Facebook posts throughout the program was a good way to cover the gaps when facilitators may be too busy to fully engage with what is for us an out-of-workload activity. However, further opportunities for real-time or synchronous interaction between facilitators and students may be necessary in the future. Creating more opportunities for synchronous participant-to-participant interaction will also be key for future iterations of the project. This will include scheduling ice-breaker activities such as large Zoom meetings or live chat sessions at the beginning of the project and constructing milestone activities or checkpoints for individual groups throughout the project.

It is important that the project results in a community of engaged and self-directed writers for students to draw on for critique and support after their university lives. But as Webb and Melrose (2015: 196-197) state,

> there is not much point in simply directing students to collaborate: it is not a natural act, but a learned one. And in addition, if students are to graduate as informed and insightful practitioners, they need more than just practice experience; they need to understand theory and principles. We therefore need a pedagogy of collaboration so that we can teach students what is involved in this process, what collaborative models are available to them, and how to evaluate the best model for a specific context.

It is important for both facilitators and students to have a clear sense of their responsibilities and commitments to the project. In the pilot run, we asked students to indicate on their expression of interest forms their willingness to remain engaged for the duration of the project and to act responsibly towards their group members (for example, to give critique in return where they have received critique from another group member). However, the specifics of the project were not clearly detailed at the outset, and some students appeared uncertain of what

they were actually expected to do. One way to overcome this problem is to have students collaboratively write, in Google Docs or another tool, a Writing Collective Members' Charter that all students must agree to uphold. This supports our desire to make the Writing Collective student-centred as well as clearly establishing the group's *raison d'être* and members' responsibilities at the outset.

While Facebook provided a convenient and familiar platform for our whole-group interactions and for students to connect with one another individually, it presented enough challenges, especially around students without Facebook accounts, that a different platform (such as Slack) will be considered in future. Wattpad itself presented a significant challenge to some students as an unfamiliar platform. In future, a live Wattpad training session using the 'share screen' feature of a video conferencing tool may function both as an ice-breaker activity at the outset of the project, and a practical training exercise. While the videos and instructions provided on the Facebook page fulfilled the training function, their one-way format precluded the opportunity for students to ask questions or to 'muck around' in the unfamiliar digital space.

In reflecting on the successes and challenges of the 2019 Writing Collective, we remain convinced of the importance of helping our students establish robust literary networks outside the university and of the potential of online spaces to facilitate these networks for both metro and regional students. Online publishing platforms such as Wattpad hold valuable possibilities as well as challenges as spaces to facilitate peer critique and to establish an online literary community among students. These platforms also bring unique opportunities for our students as emerging writers; that one student amassed a Wattpad audience of over 200, for example, demonstrates the potential of online publishing platforms to help students increase their readership as well as gain experience in a growing component and practice of the professional industry. The Writing Collective has provided a valuable opportunity to explore the unique difficulties of workshopping online for students who have not had sufficient opportunities to create strong personal bonds and trust. Though we have encountered barriers, the high levels of initial student interest in the project and the sustained engagement of some students throughout the project's duration suggest that students see value in the concept of the Writing Collective. How creative writing students can effectively peer critique through online publishing platforms such as Wattpad remains an untapped field for research; as online and blended learning continues to grow within creative writing classrooms, it is also a rich and necessary field for strengthening our understanding of ways to support the practice of emerging creative writers in tertiary education.

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