E-Methods in Literary Production: Integrating E-Learning In Creative Writing

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Abstract

This paper discusses the integration of e-learning in creative writing. The online approach to the teaching of creative writing takes into account today's Malaysian youth and their fascination with computer technology. It is this appeal of innovation in electronics and knowledge that leads an educator to design an on-line approach to a creative writing course. The theoretical construct used to support the discussion is Anderson's theory that on-line learning is knowledge-, community-, assessment-, and learner-centered. The writer, who is also the course developer, analyses a poetry-writing activity, which students undertake, and the e-portfolio used in the course. To analyze the processes involved in this creative writing exercise Macherey's (1978) Theory of Literary Production is adapted and utilized. This theory, which regards literary production as a process imitating that of a production line, provides the methodology and conceptual framework for analyzing the raw materials collected by the students and their transformation during the writing process. This paper thus addresses the benefits of e-learning in a creative writing context.

Keywords: e-learning; creative writing; writer; producer; literary production

Introduction

Computer technology and the internet offer limitless affordances to educators, and the theory and practice of on-line learning are certainly still being written today. Much has been proposed regarding the "wide and diverse forms of teaching and learning that can be supported on the Web" (Anderson, 2004: 55). It is this appeal of innovation in electronics and knowledge that leads an educator to design an on-line approach to a creative writing course. This paper, hence, discusses the integration of e-learning in creative writing. The theoretical construct used to support the discussion is Anderson's theory that on-line learning, like all forms of quality learning, is "knowledge, community, assessment, and learner centered" (ibid: 55). To achieve this, the writer, who is also the course developer, analyses a poetry-writing activity, which students undertake, and the e-portfolio used in the course. As an on-line course designer and teacher, the writer has to choose, adapt, and perfect educational activities that maximise Web affordances: these can be achieved effectively through feedback, assessment and reflection. Analysis of the poetry-writing activity and of the e-portfolio aims to address the benefits of e-learning in creative writing.

The on-line approach to the teaching of creative writing takes into account today's Malaysian youth and their fascination with computer technology. In this creative writing class, e-Methods in Literary Production, students work in a multi-media laboratory where they utilize the computer and the Internet. Designed as a third year course for students doing an undergraduate degree in Literature in English at Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, the writing workshop introduces students to creative writing, specifically poetry and short story genres. The students plan and cooperate as a writing community to participate in writing and editing sessions. They apply creative writing techniques in a writing workshop; learn skills in editing and criticism; are introduced to technical presentation skills; and learn the processes involved in writing and publication. The learning objectives are as follows: at the end of the course, students apply literary knowledge and skills to produce original creative pieces; students compose creative texts by integrating computer and technological programs; they create

multimedia presentations as well as design a blog and produce an e-portfolio of their creative writing. Various programs, such as Microsoft Word, PageMaker, FrontPage, and communicative accesses such as the internet, intranet, e-chat and 'on-line' forums are utilised to facilitate their creative production. At the end of the course, the individual e-portfolios designed are used to compile and showcase students' literary pieces. The discussion of the processes involved in the writing of poetry using e-methods, and the ways the students have incorporated their original poems into their e-portfolios, will inevitably also address the issues of e-learning in a creative writing context.

Creative writing has always been taught in an approach that requires students to work as a community in a writing workshop. But by going on-line, these students benefit from the traditional workshop environment and, additionally, gain the advantages of computer technology. In an article, entitled *Toward a Theory of On-line Learning*, Anderson (2004: 37) claims:

> the Net provides expanded opportunities for students to plunge ever deeper into knowledge resources, thus affording a near limitless means for students to grow their knowledge, to find their way around the knowledge of the discipline, and to benefit from its expression in thousands of formats and contexts.

The Internet can be a source of creativity for students; ideas can come in many forms – images, articles, videos, songs, and blogs – to name just a few. For learning to be active, it cannot happen in a content vacuum. The wealth of knowledge that the Internet offers can be overwhelming: the Web offers students a rich source of raw materials. Hence, it is important for the teacher to guide the students in their quest for knowledge. The integration of new technology should enhance the quality, accessibility and affordability of online learning without disrupting the creativity of the students. Technology should be supportive rather than disruptive. The incorporation of the Web into the course entails the e-learning approach to creative writing to be knowledge-centered.

Another way in which technology has supported this creative writing course is the availability of e-portfolios on the Web.   An electronic portfolio, also known as an e-portfolio, or alternatively called digital portfolio, is a collection of electronic evidence (artifacts that include inputted text, electronic files such as Word and PDF files, images, multimedia, blog entries and Web links etc.) assembled and managed by a user online. The use of the e-portfolio utilizes electronic learning, or e-learning, which refers to computer enhanced learning. Developments in Internet and multimedia technologies are pivotal to their use in education, which can include multimedia CD-ROMS, mp3 players, e-portfolios, emails and blogs. Besides technologies, content and services are needed to ensure successful utilization of e-learning. An e-portfolio program that is available for free on-line (http://www.myeport. com/) is utilised for this purpose. Needless to say, prior arrangement has been made by the course instructor with the owner of the site for the use of the program. Early into the course, students are introduced to the e-portfolio which allows students to publish the content while the e-portfolio system adds the layout and navigation. They request for a user account and fast reply from the e-portfolio program coordinator ensures uninterrupted schedule in the creative writing course. This e-portfolio website is also currently being utilised by every student and employee at Chandler-Gilbert Community College where they "build an ePortfolio using their network userID and password (CGCC ePortfolio Server)."   There is at present a centralized ePortfolio server shared by the other colleges in the Maricopa Community College District. MyEport eportfolios are also being used by students and faculty/staff in the Tucson Unified School district, Maine School District #52 and San Bernadino County Schools. Selection of this on-line program is determined due to its convenience and ease; this is because students do not require knowledge of web design or programming to construct their e-portfolios.

The e-portfolio, not only demonstrates the user's ability in using and managing the system, but it also serves as a platform for self-expression. It is certainly learner-centered, and due to its online nature, it can be maintained dynamically over time too. The system allows different types of pages to be built into the e-portfolio. These include:

Page Types
• Home Page This page contains a picture and text. For example, it could be a picture of the user along with a short introduction or biography. Beginning any text entry with the word spacing respects all white-space entered by the user.
• Collection Page This page contains a collection of links and associated descriptions. The link contents may already exist or be uploaded for use in this page. A short description goes on the right hand side.
• Templated Document Page This is an "html" or "txt" document that will be rendered within the ePortfolio default template and chosen format. This is typically a MS Word document saved as html and uploaded into ePortfolio.
• Weblog (blog) Page This is a series of entries (perhaps journal or log entries) ordered by date; a weblog entry can contain an optional picture plus text.
• Calendar This is an easy-to-use web calendar to be included in your ePortfolio. Users can add events to their calendar such as class times, committee meetings, holidays and vacations.
• Slide Show This is a set of pictures and captions that are turned into a slide show for you. All images are properly resized for inclusion in the slide show.
• Document Page This refers to a stand-alone document; it is prominently displayed outside of a collection and will not render within the ePortolio default template. It could be any type of document including Word, Power Point, Multimedia, etc.
• Survey Page A survey page can be included in your ePortfolio; after the survey is launched, data is collected and is easily accessible (including simple statistics and cross-tabulations).

•	Wiki Page A Wiki is a collaboratively-edited website. The distinguishing feature of wikis is that they allow all users to edit any page, with full freedom to edit, change and delete the work of previous authors. Other typical wiki features include: • A simple set of TextFormattingRules which allow access to a subset of HTML; • Easy creation of links to wiki pages by joining capitalized words (or using special characters [[newPage name]]); • Easy creation of new wiki pages. A link to an undefined page is displayed with a question mark. Click on the "?" link to create the new page; • A Recent Changes page which lists pages that have been edited recently.
•	Syllabus Page (CGCC Only) CGCC Only The Chandler-Gilbert Community College has a page type for teachers to easily construct online syllabi: it is connected to the class schedule and the Syllabus Guidelines.
•	Syllabus (non-CGCC) A version of the Syllabus page is available for non-CGCC domains.
•	Discussion Board This is a threaded discussion board that can be added to an ePortfolio.
•	Composite Page This page type allows you to create Web 2.0 style pages in the simple eportfolio user interface style; the building blocks of this page type are other eportfolio pages and RSS (which is supported from the ground up in eportfolio). This page allows you to construct a new dynamic page using these building blocks.

•	Other Features
	Familiar editor for most data entry
	• RSS updates automatically generated for collection, weblog, calendar and discusion board pages
	• Ability to subscribe for change notifications; email toggle sent to all subscribers when eport pages are updated (example Subscription Page)
	• Spell checker on all data entry pages
	• Multimedia files (uploaded as collection items and documents) can be streamed to avoid the potentially large download time. Streaming information and examples can be found here
	• RSS Sidebar - can easily add a right-hand sidebar of links (page with example sidebar)
	• Podcasting Support -Uploading multimedia files into a Collection sets up an RSS feed that can be used for podcasting.

Source: (http://www.myeport.com/)

The online medium provides a unique environment for teaching and learning. Anderson (2004: 273) claims one of the most compelling features of this context is its "ability to support content encapsulated in many formats, including multimedia, video, and text, which gives access to learning content that exploits all media attributes." For the purpose of the e-Methods in Literary Production course, students are required to utilise and design the following: (a) a Home Page, where they compose a short introduction or biography of themselves; (b) a Collection Page, which contains a collection of links such as their creative pieces saved as jpeg file; (c) a Templated Document Page, where students can upload their creative pieces as MS Word document saved as html; (d) a Weblog Page, which has a series of at least 5 entries (perhaps journal or log entries) ordered by date and can contain an optional picture plus text; (e) Slide Show, which is a set of students' personal pictures and captions that are turned into a slide show; and (f) Document Page, that is a stand-alone document of students' poems, short stories, weekly assignments, pictures in the following format including Word, Power Point, Multimedia, etc.

The utilization of e-portfolios also enhances the autonomy of the learner. Anderson (2004: 54) states that the "challenge for teachers and course developers working in an on-line learning context is to construct a learning environment that is simultaneously learning centered, content centered, community centered, and assessment centered." The writer is convinced that these four main aspects are addressed through the incorporation of the e-portfolio into the course. The e-portfolio produced by the students at the end of the course incorporates three types of electronic portfolios, namely developmental, reflective and representational. In other words, the developmental nature of the e-portfolio allows it to record the tasks and assignments completed during the creative writing course; it is reflective as it includes personal reflections of the owner through blog entries; and the e-portfolio is also representational of the owner's achievement in literary production where edited and selected pieces of original literary pieces are uploaded as documents or slide shows.

Processes in literary production

A literary writer would like to think of himself, or herself, as creator, who creates a reality on paper that is the product of his or her own imagination. But, the term 'creator' implies that literary works are borne out of nothing. On the other hand, critics claim literature is not produced in vacuum as the writer, whether consciously or not, is always influenced by his or her environment. The French Marxist theorist, Pierre Macherey (1978), who sees a writer not as a creator but a producer, has developed a model that looks at the correct literary form as a link between realist work and historical reality and the relationship between the writer and his text, as between ideology and realism. According to Macherey, the producer "works pre-existing literary genres, conventions, language and ideology into end-products: literary texts" (Jefferson & Robey, 1982: 177). These 'raw materials' include the producer's subjectivity resulting from personal experience and formal training; all these undergo transformation into something different during the writing process. Macherey's emphasis on the process of transformation of raw materials, and on ideology operating
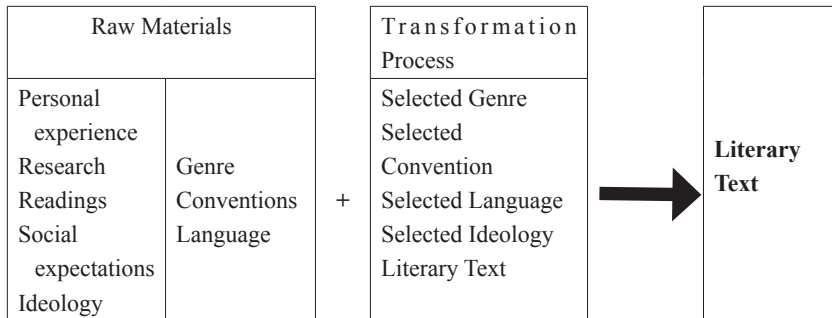
in discourse, sets apart his production model from the Formalist's view, where the writer as craftsman, functions as the user of devices.

To analyze the processes involved in this creative writing exercise, Macherey's (1978) Theory of Literary Production is adapted and utilized. This theory, which regards literary production as a process imitating that of a production line, provides the methodology and conceptual framework for analyzing the raw materials collected by the students and their transformation during the writing process. Macherey contributes to literary criticism by his attempt to formulate laws in the science of literary production by restating the relations between the text, ideology and history. It differentiates a writer's discourse as distinct from the critic's in both form and content. The theory defines the writer as producer of the text: the producer determines the finite possible combinations for the end product. Text production is not spontaneous, and even if it appears to be, it is only an effect intended by the writer. The producer's work is predetermined, and the unity of the final text is the objective of the writer. Even the unity of the whole text is a 'fallacy' as the writer has worked in conditions of these possibilities. And as the writer is only a producer, this theory dismisses the more popular humanistic notion of the writer as creator of himself. As such, the students of the e-Methods in Literary Production course take on the role of the writer as producer.

What Macherey terms as raw materials are also the rich resources available in a knowledge-centered learning environment. Bransford et al. (1999) claim effective learning as being "defined and bounded by the epistemology, language, and context of disciplinary thought." Each discipline has its own perspective, which offers unique ways of understanding and dealing about knowledge. From a Marxist perspective, Macherey claims these raw materials to include literary genres, conventions, language and ideology; collectively with the writer's personal experiences, research, readings and social expectations they have to undergo change during the writing process before their transformation into a literary text. Like the process of labour in the production line, where raw materials are first collected, then combined and finally transformed into an end-product, the role of the writer mirrors

this process. Firstly, collection of literary raw materials; secondly, undertaking of transformation process; and lastly, production of a literary text through a writing process. With the possible raw materials categorised by this theory, the raw materials incorporated into the text can be identified. Macherey's theory allows for the identification of raw materials that will enable an analysis of the transformations undergone during the writing stage.

The chart below is a graphic representation of Macherey's process of literary production:

Raw Materials		Transformation Process	Literary Text
Personal experience Research Readings Social expectations Ideology	Genre Conventions Language	Selected Genre Selected Convention Selected Language Selected Ideology Literary Text	

Hence, the use of the term 'writer' in this paper refers to the role Macherey (1978) has identified the writer with during the production of the text – as producer. As producer, the 'writer' collects raw materials and turns them into the final product – the text – through the transformation process. The identification of the producer enables an analysis of the role he or she plays in the literary production.
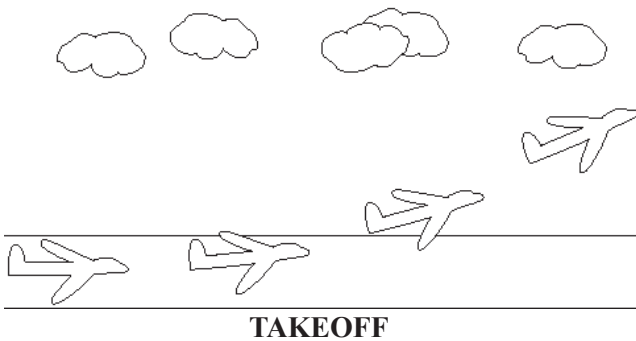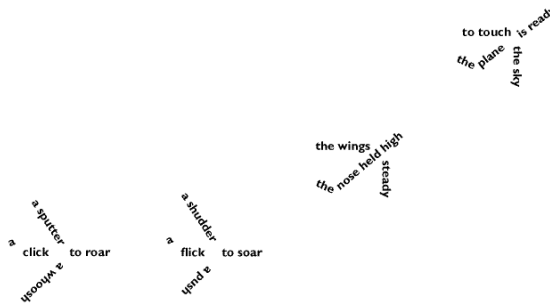

Writing a concrete poem

Burroway (2003: xxi) claims "all writing is imaginative" and that the "translation of experience or thought into words is of itself an imaginative process." The writing is also autobiographical as well as invented; clearly, this affirms that subjectivity of the writer informs the writing. The first writing assignment given to students is for them to compose a concrete poem. Also called pattern poetry, visual poetry or shaped

poetry, concrete poetry emphasizes on typographical arrangement of words, besides the other conventional elements of poetry, such as meaning of words, rhythm, rhyme, style, etc. to convey the intended effect. Hence, the visual arrangement of the text, images and symbols work together as a whole in creating the meaning. The final product will ineluctably disclose the writer's self-position at the time of the writing. An analysis of the students' poems certainly reveals how the personal becomes an inspiration to the creative production.

According to Garrison and Anderson (2003: 2), "at the core of the e-learning transformation is the Internet." The Web is certainly a rich resource for students to gather information on concrete poetry. To help with their composition, the construction of a sample concrete poem was given; this is sourced from "Wright-ing" Prompt: Concrete Poems (http://quest.arc.nasa.gov/aero/wright/teachers/wfomanual/langarts/poem.html) where two couplets are combined with a relevant visual image:

A click, a sputter, a whoosh- to **roar**!	*line 1*
A flick, a shudder, a push- to **soar**!	*line 2*
The wings held steady; the nose held **high**;	*line 3*
The plane is ready to touch the **sky**!	*line 4*

TAKEOFF

to touch is ready
the plane the sky

the wings held high
the nose held steady

a sputter   a shudder
a click   to roar   a   flick   to soar
a whoosh   a push

The inherent features of the Internet include "its interactive dimensions that allow for control of the navigating information to be with the users" (Loo & Yeap, 1998 cited in Latiffah Pawanteh & Samsudin A. Rahim, 2001: 107). Hence, diverse forms of information are provided to users upon their request. The individual user dictates the terms of his or her own use of the Internet. In this particular task, students benefit from both the traditional writing workshop environment as well as on-line learning. In this instance, the students participated as a community of learners in their role as writer/producer. They went online to browse the Web for an image (or images). Focus must be given to image(s) significant to them, for example things they like or dislike, special memento received, etc. These served as their raw materials. They were encouraged to share with the rest and talk about the image and reasons for the selection. This exercise proved successful as students found it easier and less intimidating to write about what they knew best, namely themselves. They then penned lines to form verses and stanzas. Students used Microsoft Office Powerpoint to compose the concrete poem by incorporating the image into their verses. Once completed, the Powerpoint file is converted into jpeg image.

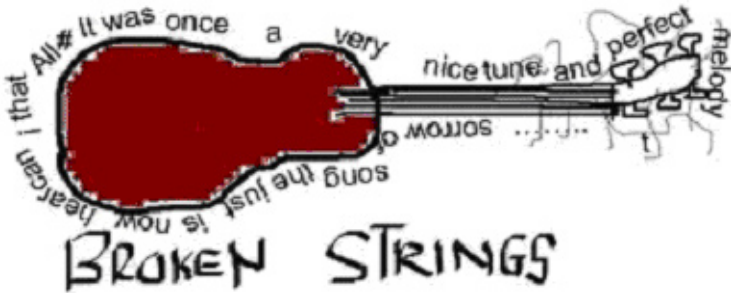The community-centered nature of the workshop environment reveals the student's self-position as writer during the writing process. Talking about the writing process is central in this exercise. Students unconsciously disclose details about themselves when they share with others the reasons for their selection of a particular image for their concrete poem. One's self-position as writer exposes one's subjectivity

– the result of personal experiences, social expectations, formal training, research and readings – which influences one's writing. For instance, individual fancy, or dislike, is a recurring theme in the concrete poems produced by the students at the end of the exercise. As an example, one student, who had a fear for spiders, self-consciously shared her terrifying experience with one with the class. She went to later produce this concrete poem:
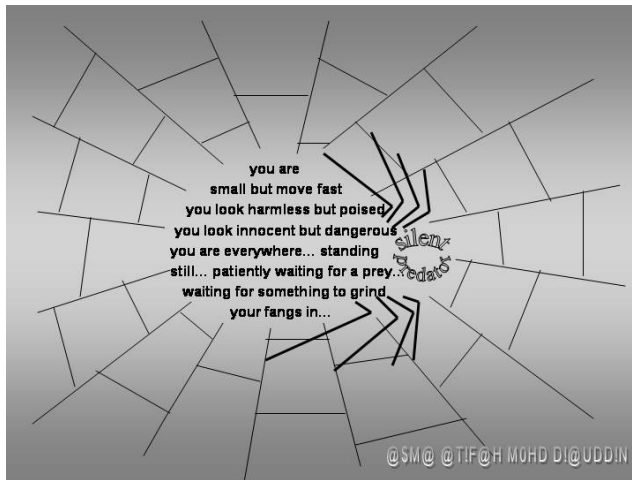
Referring to the spider as a "silent predator", her fear of the arachnid is made vivid in her imagery of the spider, "poised" on its web as it waits "for something to grind [its] fangs in [sic]". Even her choice of colours – black, white and grey – contributes to the sombre tone. The visual imagery, contrastively, depicts none of the carnivorous nature of the spider; it ironically transforms the spider instead into a fat cuddling one. The student's fear of the spider has been transformed into a more ambiguous attitude in the poem.

In contrast, a loved pet becomes the raw material for another poem. Here, the tone is joyful and the rhyming verses contribute to the cheerful nature of the poem. The accompanying imagery of a dog's paw prints and pastel colours also add to the pleasant topic.

Personal experience, such as the loss of a loved one, is another source of raw materials. Below is a concrete poem produced by another student who had just lost a best friend to cancer. This was revealed when she spoke about her poem. Interesting, however, in her poem, rather than deal with the issue as it had happened in her real life she transforms the death experience onto herself. Nonetheless, the questions raised by the occurrence of this painful event are magnified into one big question mark:

Another example of personal experience used as raw materials by the students for their concrete poems is that which addresses the joys and sorrows in one's life. Clearly, what gives joy can also bring sorrow. This is the message conveyed in the concrete poem below:

The student is musically inclined and is an accomplished singer. Having lost her mother at a young age, she is attached to her father who had bought her a guitar. Upon his death, the guitar becomes pivotal to her memories of him. When sharing her thoughts on her choice of image, she narrated how her father had taught her to play the musical instrument and how much joy she had shared with him during those moments. However, instead of invoking sweet memories the finished product reveals the transformation of her memories into conflicting emotions with regards to the guitar.

Anderson (2004: 42) claims the World Wide Web is "a multifaceted technology that provides a large set of communication and information mmangement tools that can be harnessed for effective education provision." The online nature of this course enjoys the benefits offered by the internet. The e-portfolio offers students a variety of page types to choose from. Many uploaded their concrete poems saved as jpeg files in the Slideshow Page. They also included other pictures (of self, family and friends) and wrote captions beneath each. Many slideshows focused on the self, such as family, friends, hobbies and list of favourite things. These became a source of raw materials for their creative writing. An examination of the selection of pictures and the captions beneath can reveal the students' self-position as writers. As an example, below is a partial Slideshow Page where death and the gothic take centre stage to the concern of a student:

Click on any picture below to begin Slideshow

| **1** | **2**: I LIkE This!! | **3**: gothic gothic.. |

Writing weblogs

The ease with which content can be updated and revised, either manually, or the use of autonomous agent technology makes online learning content more responsive and current than content developed for other media (Anderson, 2004).   The availability of blogs and user-friendly course-content management systems provides an environment in which teachers and learners can create and update course contents themselves. The aid of programmers and designers is no longer required.   The students are autonomous learners. The autonomy is enhanced when they upload the creative pieces in their e-portfolio; this is a form of self-publishing. The Web has empowered the students into becoming writer-producers who no longer require the services of a traditional publisher. However, even though this empowerment offers openness and freedom, the ease of creation and revision can also lead to error and "less-than-profesional-standard output" (ibid: 42).

In this course, students become part of a virtual community as they are required to keep a blog as part of their e-portfolio and post at least 5 entries. Interestingly, at the end of the course, many of them posted more than that. Weblogs is an avenue for anyone to post musings and record day-to-day happenings on-line (Jonathan Yang, 2006). The discourse is confessional in nature, and what is private and personal is made public by the technology that gives birth to it. The false-sense of 'anonymity' which students feel they have in cyber space allows them to be personal in their musings. Many of the students' earlier postings are about assignments for the course; this confession often reveals their thoughts and emotions on creative writing:

short story!!
we are asked to write a short story. but i have no idea how to start. i thought of writing
about me. But.. i don't want to reveal my true self to the world. i thought of creating a story
line. but i don't feel like it. hmm..what to write about?? clueless now!!
perhaps i should write about him and his story. afterall.. he is someone with some interesting \
background. shall i do that?
Published Sep 19, 2007 12:09 AM   Comment

Hopes..
Its been some times since i last posted here...Been very busy with all the works..
Thats me..LIke to do all under pressure...But still i hope that i will finished everything
before the semester end..in about 2 weeks time...sigh...
I met him few days ago...i feel like he has changed a lot.. he is now more matured..
he has grown..no longer a kid that will joke around witth me for everything..
i can see the seriousness on his face when he was talking to me..
but..im sure glad he is still caring..loving..
other people might not understand about this relationship..but i do..
i refuse to listen to what people wants to tell.. i know him..
they don't.. i have faith and hope in him..
now is a bad time for us i guesss...but im sure that we gonna get through it..
striving for success.. Hopes..
Published Sep 25, 2007 08:35 PM   Comment

The second posting, however, deals with matters of the heart. The student talks about her relationship with a loved one in the midst of talking about class assignments. Her "hopes" in her strive for success is intricately involved with her "faith and hope in him." There is a blurring between the lines of objectivity and subjectivity, which is the nature of blogging. This is certainly as David Weinberger observes in which the confessional nature of blogs has redrawn the line between the private and the public dimensions of our lives (2002).

Interestingly, poems are also posted as blog entries. Besides the requirement of the two poems for the course, students went on to produce more which were then posted as entries in their blogs. Many of the poems address personal issues, such as that of identity, clearly a central concern for these young adults. The poem below questions the issue on a poignant note:

It's not 'I'

Who is this girl
I see before me?
She's staring back at me
Doing the same exact things that I'm doing
Well, it's my reflection
But somehow
I feel like I don't know her
It's not 'I' whom I see before me
It's someone else
Someone I don't know
It's not 'I'
by Michelle Shalini

Even though the poems are free verse, images are still central to the students' composition too. Nearly all of the poems are accompanied with at least one image that reflects the message in the poem, such as the one in the example above and below. Images taken from the internet are transformed into representations of the self. The act of searching for an image that is relevant to the poem becomes seemingly necessary as many students confessed their enjoyment of composing and designing their poetry presentation:

Lonely Inside

I often hide
When I'm terrified
I never hesitate to fight
When I know I'm right

I never tear
Even though I fear
For I believe the Lord
Is always near

Sometimes I wish
Of being rich
But just by an inch
Don't want to be a *****

At times I want to run away
Or fly away
To a perfect hideaway

Cause it's hard for a girl
To survive this world
With no one beside
And so lonely inside

By Michelle Shalini

Conclusion

An e-learning approach to the teaching of creative writing is new in this institution as the course was first taught in 2007. The incorporation of online learning to creative writing produces the e-portfolios discussed in this paper which are products of the first batch of students. Macherey's theory of literary production has provided the means for an analysis of the transformation of raw materials in the production process. Anderson's theory of online learning has been used to frame the discussion of this e-approach to creative writing. In assessing the poetry-writing activity conducted and the e-portfolio used in the

course, the writer, who is also the course designer and teacher, is able to analyse whether the educational experiences created have been learning-, knowledge-, assessment- and community-centered. These are Anderson's expectations from the online learning approach.

This paper addresses the benefits of e-learning in a creative writing context. The processes involved in the writing of poetry using e-methods have shown that utilising computer technology and the internet complement, rather than hamper, the creativity of the students. Students are empowered by the autonomous nature of the Internet when they 'publish' their creative pieces by uploading them into their e-portfolios. The freedom of the Internet also opens the creative writing of the students to instant feedback from visitors to their weblogs. The Web certainly becomes a rich source of raw materials, which the students later transform into their creative pieces. The e-portfolio provides an innovative way for students to store and incorporate their literary productions into various forms, such as Word documents, jpeg files, slide shows and blog entries. The on-line and interactive nature of the e-portfolio means it can be maintained dynamically over time; students can continue to upload and maintain their e-portfolios even after completing the course. And the possibility of their Homepages and e-portfolios being read by other netizens also adds to the appeal of this creative writing exercise.

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