



## **Collaboration, community, identity: Engaged e-learning and e-teaching in an online writing course**

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This paper presents a narrative enquiry of the use of learning technologies and communities of practice (Wenger, 1998) in creating and delivering the online Master of Arts (Writing) at Swinburne University of Technology. We consider the research question of how we have come to understand and practice elements of a social constructivist pedagogy involving engaged, learner-centred peer and community support both as a creative team and as e-moderators. We consider, too, that our pedagogy is informed by poststructural understandings of learner identities as invested and unfixed (Weedon, 1997). This study utilizes the self as data by drawing on narratives of course developers and lecturers collaborating to create unique materials. While our methodology utilises elements of autoethnography (Chang, 2008), it also involves analyzing themes and narrative configurations in stories (Polkinghorne, 1995), specifically those of tutors and students. Our narrative exemplifies and proposes strategies for writing e-curriculum for web 2.0; for scaffolding e-learning, and for creating and maintaining communities of invested, engaged learners. Simultaneously we add nuances to the scholarly conversation about e-learning communities, e-curriculum development and subjective academic narrative methodology.

Key words – creative writing, e-curriculum, communities of practice, learner identity

### **1. Introducing our story**

This paper relates the ongoing story of the use of learning technologies in creating and delivering the online Master of Arts (Writing) at Swinburne University of Technology (SUT). Ours is a story spanning a decade, questioning how we have come to understand and practice elements of a social constructivist pedagogy involving learner-centred peer support and engaging learners within communities of practice. Broadly, what have we learned that we can share with providers of online learning? More specifically, how have our experiences of such teaching interventions as building and maintaining online communities of learners and fostering ‘critical friendships’ impacted on the student experience of studying Writing online and the tutor

experience of e-moderating? The themes of our enquiry, collaboration, community and identity, serve to structure our story. Our story is itself formally and methodologically a narrative enquiry, a subjective academic narrative. Like Polkinghorne (1998), we hold that narratives contain, or even *are*, people's identities.

Since 2002, this postgraduate course has provided a virtual learning environment through the Learning Management System (LMS) Blackboard. Its pedagogical position utilises people, print and electronic technologies to engage students through virtual lectures, dedicated websites, hyperlinked selected readings and dynamic e-tutorials. This engagement comes in part from creating interventions linking program materials to the writing practice of individual, developing writers, and partly from encouraging sense of community, 'a feeling that members have of belonging, a feeling that members matter to one another and to the group, and a shared faith that learners' needs will be met through their commitment to be together' (McMillan & Chavis, 1986, p.9) through collaborative and authentic practices that build partnerships and community allegiances between and among participants.

Collaboration in communities is a key pedagogical intervention, but for writers there is also the question of the individual invested in her or his writing, creativity and applied learning. This paper, to some extent, examines how we use online communities to reconcile the collective and the individual. Since all of our participants strongly desire to identify as writers and to belong professionally to groups attended by writers, we conceive of their desires to be, to become and to belong in terms of desire to align with 'imagined communities' (Anderson, 1983). Yasuko Kanno and Bonnie Norton (2003) believe Anderson's analogy of nationhood and community helps those who want to belong feel a sense of community with people not yet met. In applying Anderson's concept, we envisage a culture's sense of community as an imagined space. We view individuals as idealising community and creating a sense of self through these imaginings. Students of writing want to belong to the elite group labelled 'writers' and to associated communities; but they also want to develop their own voices. There are, as in Jean Lave and Etienne Wenger's (1991) formulations, connections between imagined community and desired identity. The MA draws on this insight in its application of the collaborative pedagogical intervention of critical friendship and in understanding learners' desires for a future self as a writer impacts learner investment (Andrew, 2009).

The core unit of year 1 study 'Critical Friends' acculturates our students to learning in communities of practice (CoPs), establishing the behaviours that characterise their support of others' learning throughout the program. 'Critical friendship' refers to an organised, mutual, reciprocal exchange of ideas and work for the purposes of improving submissions before they are posted to tutors. The concept used *the collective* – the community of practice – as a vehicle for addressing the *individual*. Critical friendship involves giving and receiving feedback at both mechanical-discursive and critical-analytic levels. At various stages, the technique is used with the aid of both criterion-based guides to giving critically friendly feedback and, prior to submission, guides to editing. Critical friendships are forged early in the 13-week course between sympathetic participants within online discussion forums, are mediated by tutors and may last for the duration of the program and beyond.

The evolving story of the MA (Writing) emphasises the interconnected themes of collaboration, community and identity in relation to both our e-curriculum and e-learning designs and our teaching/delivery. For Rena M. Palloff and Keith Platt (2005), collaboration is the 'cornerstone' of e-learning and the grounding of e-community (p.xi), accomplishing such outcomes as addressing all learning styles and cultures, assisting with deeper knowledge generation, promoting creativity and initiative and allowing shared goals for the foundation of a learning community (pp.6-7). Social constructivism, informed by both Vygotskian and sociocognitive theories of learning, foregrounds the centrality of engaged learning communities mediated through the LMS, particularly the discussion and chat facilities (LaPointe & Reisetter, 2008). In their study of postgraduate students' 'sense of community online', LaPointe & Reisetter point to the importance of 'belonging'. This suggests both the need for an articulated and *heard* voice in the e-community and a desire for identification with other imagined communities beyond the immediate e-environment. In this context, we recognise identity for writing students is more than 'social presence' as involving the salient person we become online and how we express that persona (Gunawardena & Zittle, 1997; Kear, 2010). Our experience indicates that the identities involved in creating and participating in e-environments in writing are, like poststructuralist identities Weedon

(1997) describes, complex, affected by power, desire and discourse and subject to change. Bourdieu (1986) would consider them 'invested' identities, beyond the dualities of extrinsic and intrinsic or instrumental and integrative motivation, but rather integrated towards creating and developing authentic writerly identities, the cultural capital of writing programs (Ivanic, 1997).

While the themes of collaboration, community and identity apply to our learners – largely working professionals seeking to develop their creativity and/or a career tree-change – our story also tells of how the still-evolving program develops from *carpe diem* style collaborations among lecturers, learning designers and ITS specialists (Armellini & Jones, 2008; Salmon, Jones & Armellini, 2008); how our ongoing curriculum development and e-learning design are impacted by insights from the social constructivist concept of CoP (Brown & Duguid, 2000; Jonassen, Peck, & Wilson, 1999; Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998), and how we recognise the individual pedagogical contributions of members of the lecturing team as contributing to well-mapped subjects within a clearly structured program comprising 12 subjects across 3 levels.

Beyond the core team of lecturers, we involve the wider teaching team - including specialist guest lecturers and sessional tutors - in the design-redesign action research cycle that informs our teaching and learning practices. These people have writing identities and links to industry. The curriculum gives them as well as the tenured lecturers and their specialist discourse audiovisual presence in our program. The concepts of *mutual engagement*, *joint enterprise* and *shared repertoire* (Wenger, 1998) – and the sharing of this repertoire – are central to both the development and reconstruction of e-learning environments and the facilitation of collaborative learning spaces in the LMS. The sharing of lecturer, tutor and learner discourse informs sections 4 and 5 of this paper, where we relate designer, lecturer, tutor and participant experiences of teaching and learning in our e-environment.

An increasing body of research investigates the impact of socialisation and collaboration in CoPs on learner identity in cyberspace (Brook & Oliver, 2003; Haythornthwaite, Kazmer, Robins & Shoemaker, 2000; Jones & Peachey, 2005; Kreijns, Kirschner & Jochems, 2003; Rovai, 2002). Socialisation is, of course, Gilly Salmon's crucial second stage in her five-stage model of teaching and learning online (2003; 2004), emphasising a mixture of constructivist learning design and strategic e-moderating bringing forward 'imaginative and creative images' (2004, p.34) as two keys. Palloff and Platt (2005, 2007) led the way in strategising the scaffolding of e-learning to maximise sense of community while similarly promoting creativity and critical thinking. In our narrative, this strategising has shown itself as most significant for the students' learning journeys.

Fundamentally, engaged students need to be both *responsive* and *involved* to enable community building (Palloff & Platt, 2007, p.72). In such communities, constructivist learning is 'active, constructive, intentional and cooperative' (Jonassen et al., 1999). Brown and Duguid (2000) established three principles for learning in communities; it is: *demand-driven*, *a social act* and *an act of identity formation*. In our narrative of the MA (Writing), we view learning as collaboration yet we focus on each individual constructing their identity within the social space of the learning group. As a result, people have shared visions and identities in common: 'People, forming a community, come together because they are able to identify with something – a need, a common shared goal and identity' (Hung & Der-Thang, 2001, p.3). 'In an e-learning community', Tu and Corry (2002) advise, 'members work together to solve their problems and to improve their communities using knowledge construction media and technology' (p.209). Our fundamental subject 'Critical Friends' informs this throughout the MA (Writing).

Studies also suggest that the resulting imagining of participation in future communities can be an even more powerful spur to students' investment (Kanno & Norton, 2003). Students' imagined communities can be better realised by understanding learners' desired selves (Markus & Nurius, 1986). Hazel Markus and Paula Nurius emphasise that learners might possess conceptions of possible selves that differ from their current actual self; this certainly applies to our writers. The sharing of discourse and repertoire in our e-learning environment helps learners describe their desires and ambitions, and to see themselves both as developing individual voices and as members of imagined communities, starting with their online tutorial group and developing with their development of critical friendships facilitated and mediated by the e-environment. For many, imagined

communities are sites of publication, virtual or real, places of desire for belonging.

## **2. The story of our methodology**

This is our story about how we practice autoethnography and subjective academic narrative enquiry in both making and reflecting upon our e-learning and e-teaching curricula and delivery. Such academic narrative non-fiction is a research method academics apply in their writing to demonstrate that autobiographical experiences can be analysed and interpreted in their research so as to unpeel and unpack their cultural assumptions (Chang, 2008, p.9).

Arising from and embedded in our unique curricula pedagogy, this methodological prism recognises the impossibility of seeing ourselves as academics as either independent or unaligned. We come from a cultural discourse and we participate in that discourse. Our storytelling recognises this and provides a space in which we can understand acting against the 'given' or cultural meta-narratives that have dominated so much of academic discourse. We recognise that we are enabled by critiquing perspectives that lead us to undertake research in an area and/or pursue a certain line of investigation and research question because of our Eurowestern understandings, particularly those of the Enlightenment.

The self-narrative in autoethnography leads to and involves the analysis of storytelling and enquiry into self and others as data rather than mere presentation of story. Autoethnography takes self-narrative from the arena of storytelling into that of the production of data leading to new knowledge and/or new understanding of areas of known knowledge. Stemming from anthropology, autoethnography 'transcends mere narration of self to engage in cultural analysis and interpretation' (Chang, 2008, p.43). Unpeeling and unpacking the self and the ways in which it produces data through interactions, observations, analyses and interpretations provides us with insights into the modes of thought, action and interaction that underpin and/or evolve from enacting the self and others as data. For Carolyn Ellis and Art Bochner (2000), this provides 'autobiographies that self-consciously explore the interplay of the introspective, personally engaged self with cultural descriptions mediated through language, history and ethnographic explanation' (p.742).

While our study is methodologically an autoethnographic subjective academic narrative, we also draw on and analyse qualitative data from our nine tutors and from 12 students who completed the program in 2010. The nine tutors all responded to a series of directed cues in a questionnaire administered by e-mail and the students contributed free-written 250-word reflective logs in the LMS addressing the question of the learning value of the program's development of a sense of community. The questions asked the tutors were:

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

Because our method analyses data about others as well as ourselves, we draw from Polkinghorne's (1995) theory of narrative configurations in enquiry, enabling us to identify elements and themes in both our own stories, and those of our tutors and final year students. Seeking key themes and common understandings is a feature of autoethnographic approaches (Chang, 2008), but is also resonant with the form of thematic analysis Ryan and Bernard (2003) call 'theoretical sensitivity' (p.88). This method draws on 'word-based' and 'scrutiny-based' techniques of readerly observation (Ryan & Bernard, 2003). Borrowing from Sandelowski (1995), we used a method of closely reading the material, identifying key micronarratives to understand everyday practices and underlining key phrases 'because they make some as yet inchoate sense' (p.373). To ensure this data is controlled for this paper, we focus on micronarratives related to collaboration, community and identity.

While we acknowledge the limitations in a methodology reliant on self-reportage and small sample size, we maintain, with Polkinghorne (1998), that narrative of self as an academic autoethnography is a strong qualitative methodology; it is most appropriate in our discipline, Writing.

### 3. Our backstory

This section develops the story of how we came to teach online, including what unique features we saw as presenting new and valuable learning possibilities.

Since 2002, this postgraduate course has been delivered online, providing a virtual learning environment and learning and teaching community through Blackboard. As sections 4 and 5 reveal, online learning has provided both staff and students with challenging yet productive experiences regarding developing their own writing understandings and capacities as well as interacting with staff, peers and the possibilities of web 2.0. We have developed, and continue to develop, strategic intent to adopt appropriate technologies and pedagogical approaches (Salmon et al., 2008). For the past five years (2007-2011) subject enrolments have reached between 700 and 1000 per annum, and 5 graduates of the program have so far completed PhDs by artefact and exegesis, with another 20 candidates enrolled.

As early adopters, we were not hamstrung by paradigmatic thinking and were encouraged to produce 'imaginative and creative images' such as those Salmon described (2004, p.34). Funded by a grant, we were initially (2002) engaged by what we could do with a games-based CD-Rom for multimedia interactivity and how we could combine this with online delivery spaces where students could practice interactions with the materials, with one another, and with relevant expert information/ opinions/ deliveries from selected sites. This pedagogical innovation involved the provision of an interactive multi-media game 'G21: Australia's Cultural Dreaming' (Arnold, Green & Vigo, 1997-2003), dedicated web pages for each unit with virtual lectures delivered in print enlivened with visual interviews, weekly questions for discussion with links to relevant expert contacts, discussion threads as virtual tutorials, an interactive chatroom and virtual spaces for students to workshop one another's writing.

The excitement of asynchronous deliveries meant that we exploited fully what was different to time and space regulated f2f delivery: an early recognition of the timeless and non-geographic factors of cyberspace (Arnold, 2004). We applied student-centred principles, anticipating those of Palloff and Pratt (2005) and Salmon (2004), and developed a curriculum that enabled teachers to act as co-constructors of student learning towards particular goals in particular subjects. As we redevelop, we respond to such observations as LaPointe & Reisetter's (2008):

Avoiding the use of the traditional FTF communication template, and creating instead new structures that make optimal use of the autonomy-supporting strengths of online course delivery, appears to be a necessary paradigm shift (p.655).

In our ongoing updating of units, lecturers have applied a range of agreed innovative principles, such as

- maximising opportunities for learners to develop autonomy and agency;
- utilising texts which privilege indigenous and 'other' voices;
- ensuring weekly tasks have different cognitive demands;
- maximising spaces for reflection for, in and on action;
- incorporating critical friendship in each unit as they are redeveloped;
- involving representatives of industry in our curriculum development;
- understanding how e-moderation scaffolds learning from lectures, hyperlinked texts and student-generated texts, balancing the need for individuals to develop new and confident voices with the collective impulse to work in online communities of learners.

This is a necessary compression of our narrative about the background to a course that began in 2002. It indicates how a narrative requires a reader and a purpose for that reader (Barthes, 1977).

### 4. The story of course developers and lecturers

Thus, as our backstory testifies, our unique activities in the asynchronous MA have arisen from a long interaction with theory and practice regarding the opportunities offered by cyber-deliveries including the dimensions of cyberspace itself. In practice, we have investigated what the cyber experience of learning spaces

offers the developer of curricula that f2f deliveries may not, particularly the ‘multi-layered communicative experiences’ beyond ‘mouse click and keyboard activities’ (Reimann et al., 2003). We have developed interviews with lecturers and experts within dedicated subject websites that provide virtual lectures and tutorial spaces. The 3,000-5,000-word lectures are hyperlinked to a range of texts beyond the virtual classroom from, for example, streaming videos of book shows to archives of radio interviews with writers. The subject websites have weekly questions arising from lectures, leading learners to a pathway in cyberspace of relevant expert comments and offerings. Students share their own discovered sites with the e-learning community, in itself an empowering use of cyberspace for student contributions to e-curriculum.

As we update materials, considering and utilising ‘multiple possibilities’ as they arise in the new technologies remains an essential element. These vary from, for instance, recommending downloadable mind-mapping and note-making programs, to exploring oral feedback, to exploiting social media as an informational tool and a supplement to e-communities located in the LMS. Interactivity, ‘capable of establishing a two-way connection between distributed participants for the exchange of audio, video, text and graphical information’ (Kreijns et al., 2003, p.346) affords multiple possibilities that we, as a community of learners, explore assiduously with staff and students.

In preparing and delivering this material, we acted in ways that developed unique e-learning and e-teaching methodologies. For example, both during the course’s creation (2002) and its recreation (2009-2012), we formed a *carpe diem*-style team. This included online designers and evaluators as well as staff who developed curriculum with a view to producing online electronic lectures and interactive complementary or supplementary tutorials, followed by an assessed environment for discussion, collaboration, community building and identity negotiation. We paid particular reference to e-tivities facilitating online learning (Salmon, 2003) and cybercollaboration in ways that were different from f2f presentations (Palloff & Pratt, 2005). We saw that whilst an excessive amount of the www is print-based, we could bring virtual (and real) people into videos, and design screens with their own aesthetics rather than being simulacra for chalking-and-talking heads (Arnold, 2004).

The capacity to connect with ‘critical friends’ (peers, colleagues), virtual learning communities (tutorial groups; industry-related, writing and professional groups); lecturers, guest lecturers and tutors (e-moderators, supervisors, mentors, experts) is another unique feature of our pedagogical applications of the web. The WWW is used as a dynamic place for curriculum to develop and change frequently and for the most up-to-date applications and information to be available to academics and students as they turn ‘information’ into knowledge. We concentrate on CoPs that ‘inform’ evolving voices as writers, abilities to support others in their learning community and potential to contribute to other future imagined communities, such as sites where writers present and publish their work.

Through lecturers’ interest in the scholarly discourse of writing, representation generally and cybertextuality, we bring to our e-curriculum development a depth of theory that provides a nexus between information and understanding. So electronic asynchronous learning and teaching spaces with access to web 2.0 and its social media interests us practically and theoretically. The theory involves an understanding of the practical implications of such areas of critical and cultural theory as the rhizomatic text (Deleuze & Guattari, 1981). Such a linearity of thinking is a way of understanding the possibilities of cyberspace as lateral. Just as grass ‘creeps’, so the multiple links and connections enabled by the vast resources of cyberspace can be seen as a new way of conceptualising e-knowledge interactions.

Postmodernist theories about textuality, discourse and identity (Barthes, 1977; Derrida, 1978) advance thinking about and practice of any linear analytico-referential knowledge-model being overtaken by lateral postmodernist discourse. Such a conceptual framework involves Ulmer’s ‘mystory’ (1989) and the dispersal of certainties in considering the practice of writing a discursive piece on a given topic that adds to academic knowledge. Briefly, Ulmer proposes that there is in academic writing the self and the researched, the conscious intellectual semiotic and that arising from storytelling. These insights, applied to learners writing in e-communities, open for learners multiple textual possibilities and present options for multiple, flexible writerly identities.

## 5. The story of tutor and student experiences

The stories of the tutors who e-moderate the ALN and the students who experience the program lie at the heart of this section. More specifically, we draw on a study of nine tutor reflections on the themes of collaboration in community (Andrew, 2009), and 12 MA students' freeflow reflections on the usefulness of the learning environment of the MA, with its emphases on critical friendship and learning in CoPs, written after they completed their final unit. The nine tutors whose words inform our story are largely graduates of the program who have undertaken professional development in e-moderation and who have worked a minimum of four semesters on the program. From these reflective narratives we extract a range of micro-narratives, reconstructed here to create a narrative of experiences (Polkinghorne, 1995), using the authentic voices of the writers.

The first micronarrative addresses the issue of whether the program's use of critical friendships and spaces for building partnerships and community adds substantive pedagogical value; all agree (one reservedly) it does. Tutor 1 holds the most representative and clearest *pro*-voice:

The sense of community is highly constructive. Students relax and feel easier, ask more questions, find their own experiences relevant and learn more effectively. Many are amazed at the sense of community that can emerge through the digital environment ... many students express genuine amazement at how supported they feel, not only via staff, but by each other. For many the sense of community between the students is the most important and valuable aspect of the course – and a completely unexpected bonus.

This tutor's discourse speaks for her students' senses of ease and amazement at the effect of the community support scaffolded into the program's delivery. The amazement she describes originates partly in the realisation that peers are assets as well as tutors and partly in the fact that such support is possible in a virtual environment. The following voices also testify to the learning value of being invested in the community, itself comprising skilled individuals:

It's the quality of the people and relationships where the real learning takes place (Student 12)

I have no doubt I've been in the company of some future best-selling authors, screenwriters and renowned academics (Student 9)

I gained from having been exposed to committed students/ peers who were open in their participation on the discussion board that genuinely enjoyed sharing their vast knowledge and experience (Student 11)

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

In the student voices there is also consensus that sharing experience, reassurance and feedback within critical friendship is a key way to build supportive networks. This impacts on individuals' learning about others' creative processes as well as their own both in the present community and, quite explicitly, into future imagined ones:

My fellow students and critical friends provide reassurance as well as feedback that creativity can be frustrating, sometimes difficult and a never-ending evolution of ideas but it is something we all need to do. (Student 2)

The discussion between team members has been vibrant. We have exchanged samples of our proposed artefacts to get a feel for each other's work. (Student 9)

There is no full stop to this post, in keeping with a lively future anticipated for the critical friendship network formed by our tutorial group. (Student 3)

Feeling part of the professional writing community can allow students entrée and mentoring in a very competitive and quite nepotistic industry. (Tutor 8)

The CoP in which the students share and reflect is microcosmic of the wider world of writers' communities beyond the program - imagined communities: the professional organisations such as the Writers' centres recommended by tutor 8. For such future and imagined communities, though, some students are unready:

I am reluctant to step beyond familiar, imposed structures of the course into future in which I must find my own path. I am not ready (student 3)

I've found this log a bit hard to write as I've psychologically shifted into break-up mode and haven't written anything on the computer for a few days (student 5)

These references to psychological reliance on community resources point to the need to use social networks to preserve the impetus on the learning and take us into the micronarrative on autonomy and agency. The ability to be an independent learner and a technological self-starter in the face of being physically isolated helps define the necessary learner orientation for those studying writing online:

Working online has sometimes been difficult and yet it is at present, the only way I can attend a university. Aside from this course I do not regularly have the chance to discuss ideas, debate, share writing or cultural ideas. (Student 1)

When people enrol in a distance-learning course, they assume a high-degree of individual responsibility for their learning, working with prepared materials to learn the terms, concepts, and skills presented there. (Tutor 2)

Tutors need to demonstrate that working collaboratively on each other's texts has mutual benefits for all participants, as well as building writerly autonomy. (Tutor 3)

Working in communities ideally focuses writers on their weaknesses and tendencies in their writing so they can generate texts agentially. A related micronarrative focuses on individual writerly identities. There is a strong feeling that, while the community of learning was effective as a constructive and supportive mechanism, there was space in the pedagogic design for individual reflectiveness and learning about individuals' identities as writers:

The course encourages them to think of themselves as writers from day 1 – and this is an important step in the development of their practice. (Tutor 1)

All writing students are probably by definition centred on their writerly selves. (Tutor 5)

And throughout my writing journey I have paused to look within. Who am I? What do I believe now compared to a year ago or ten years ago? Where do I want to go on both my inner and outer writing path? How will this change the other parts of my life? (Student 1)

I have grown so much personally from the degree, which it has transferred across to my writing.... at the end of this journey I consider myself a writer and for that I am thankful to all as I couldn't have asked for a more concluded result. (Student 11)

The final micronarrative describes the most effective e-moderating and tutoring interventions for teaching and learning in a context of critical friendships and e-community:

The tutor should always provide positive criticism and say encouraging words whenever possible. This will make students feel competent and it will definitely do wonders to their motivation. (Tutor 9)

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



feedback and assessment of his or her performance on assignments and examinations. (Tutor 8)

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

The tutor stands beyond the community of writers yet plays e-moderational roles of questioning, challenging, critiquing, validating and encouraging with authority.

## 6. Concluding our story

Our paper asked how our experiences of building and maintaining online communities of learners and engaging them in ‘critical friendships’ impacted on the student experience of studying Writing online and the tutor experience of e-moderating. The themes of community, collaboration and identity resound strongly as the uniting factors in our story of how we engage our online students of postgraduate writing. Engagement means students are *responsive* and *involved* and these also enable community building (Palloff & Platt, 2007). The Wengerian concepts of *mutual engagement*, *joint enterprise* and *shared repertoire* (1998) remain sound precepts, but writers also need space to grow, develop voices and imagine communities beyond the e-learning environment we created. The narratives of students and tutors suggest that positive experiences in learning situations like e-environments building critical friendship can achieve have impacts on motivation, learning and identities, potentially making future selves and membership in imagined communities beyond the e-environment seem more achievable. They also suggest that it is possible for teaching and learning in our e-environment to privilege the development of individuals’ writerly voices and identities, aided by tutor feedback, e-moderational interventions and, perhaps most revealingly, insights and critiques from peers.

The creation of an e-environment for writers emphasising critical friendship and learning in CoPs provides a focus for constructive, interactive, engaging text generation/ regeneration as well as a site for thinking about writing as a negotiated construction and the product of postmodern unfixed identities. This seems particularly apt as we continue to think about cyberidentities and cybertextualities. Social constructivist insights align with postmodern. Ulmer’s (1989) ‘mystorical’ approach, for instance, enables academic writing and language to be open, explorative and aware of its own evanescent nature. The texts that students create in our e-environment are hopefully ‘in-formed’ in that they construct knowledge out of textual, hypertextual and audiovisual lecturer input and cybertextual information beyond the LMS and apply it to their own generated texts; the process of coming to know ‘in-forms’ both their writing and their writerly identities. This process of becoming informed in turn enables writers to challenge and develop their individual voices and push the boundaries of their understandings of the forms and genres they write comfortably in. It’s an examination of self within an ideally trustworthy e-community still characterised by McMillan and Chavis’s ‘sense of community’ (1986).

Once again, the elements of community, collaboration and identity emerge as defining themes in the story of the origins and evolution of our program. It’s a story of learners’ challenging yet productive experiences regarding developing their own writing understandings and capacities as well as interacting with staff, peers and the possibilities of the www. It’s a story of lecturers’ *carpe diem*-style collaborations with web and learning designers, at the same time preserving the uniqueness of their own individual marks.

Broadly, our paper was an enquiry into what we learned that we could share with fellow providers of online learning. The story of the students and tutors acts as a reflective evaluation of the creation and recreation of an e-environment for teaching and learning postgraduate writing outlined in the story of course developers and lecturers. Amongst our learning, mirroring that of LaPointe and Reisseter (2008), is the need to foster autonomy and agency more strongly. We continue to struggle with how best to utilise what is perhaps the least considered element in e-learning communities: the logistically-unfriendly area of the aesthetics of the e-screen. Our aim throughout the processes of (re)designing and (re)delivering was and remains to provide a quality e-learning experience through curricula that utilise the possibilities provided by ‘the e’ itself, particularly the possibilities for collaboration, community and the negotiation of writers’ identities. Clearly, to echo Reimann et al. (2003),

our students' burgeoning e-literacy and the multiplicity of possibilities arising in new technologies should be the basis for new learning opportunities for curriculum development. This is a story about creating a multi-faceted e-learning environment and the empowering use of cyberspace and being open to what Deleuze and Guattari (1987) might regard its rhizomatic potential. Like the story of lifelong learning in 'the e', this, too, is, and must be, an unfinished tale.

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