

Engagement versus challenge in a reflective travel writing assignment

Bronwin Leigh Patrickson, *Universities of Dundee and Leeds*,
b.l.patrickson@leeds.ac.uk

SUMMARY

This case study discusses a reflective writing assignment within a *Travel Writing and Journalism* (TWJ) module delivered at the University of Leeds in Yorkshire, England from 2015 – 2017. When the course tutor was commissioned to develop and lead the module they were given a summary course outline that included pre-set assessment items approved by a planning committee. The Reflective Writing assignment was included in that preliminary course overview, which the tutor developed to suit. TWJ was an optional, 2nd year module available as part of the University of Leeds' Discovery programme, which meant that arts and social science students from across the University could enrol in the module, regardless of their major degree programme. Course participants were generally well-educated, motivated, curious about the world and passionate about travel. Nevertheless, each semester a significant number of those enrolled started the course with limited knowledge of the intricacies of transcultural media politics and only a sketchy appreciation of the genre.

The reflective writing assignment developed in response to that situation. In order to satisfy the assessment criteria, participants needed to reflect upon the ways that they had developed their practice by engaging with the early course materials. The challenge to first engage with the course materials, in order to reflect upon that process was deliberate. To help prepare the student writers for the final assignment, a major creative non-fiction article (or equivalent) due at the end of the module the first, formative assignment challenged them to develop the stylistic, cultural and theoretical underpinning of that project by reflecting upon the thematic context of the work. That context was informed by a range of different activities, such as the ways that students were able to analyse and adapt course readings for their own creative purposes and their response to in class screenings and discussions.

The reflective writing assignment was not always popular with students. For many, this was the first time that they had been asked to reflect upon their own creative engagement with course materials. Some students complained that the challenge to do so was stressful and confusing. Nevertheless, the assignment also became a prompt for reflective insight and transformation.

INTRODUCTION

The second-year module *Travel Writing and Journalism* at the University of Leeds was part of an optional discovery stream offered at the university. Over an eleven-week programme of weekly, two-hour interactive lecture-seminars students explored the definitions of a genre of storytelling that includes everything from personal memoir, to comic yarn, documentary evidence and investigative report. Craft skills covered within the course included the importance of detailed observations and

descriptive techniques, as well as how to find and check stories, make contacts, conduct and record successful interviews. Potential plot structures for journey stories were workshopped, including the ways that those journey stories might also change across different platforms, for different audiences and with different media treatments. Drafts were nurtured in peer writing groups and attention-grabbing leads were polished through a series of in class editorial exercises.

Discovery modules at the University of Leeds are optional enrolments open to students across disciplines as a way to broaden their academic experience beyond their main degree programme. The *Travel Writing and Journalism* discovery course attracted undergraduate students from the Schools of History, English, Media, Fashion and Performance Studies. In the first class, course participants shared all sorts of reasons to love travel and swapped anecdotes as readily as packing tips.

- *When I'm not dawdling in my room, attempting to write an assignment, or standing with my head in the larder eating vegemite; you'll find me climbing up mountains.*
- *I have so far managed to visit twelve of the twenty countries that dominate my every wish list...now I feel like I have whole continents inside me head that long to be shared.*
- *...having never left home for more than a few days at a time, I don't really know what to expect.*

Please note: For privacy reasons, all student commentary contained within this case study is a modified representation of the original.

Whilst the thirst for discovery and adventure was readily apparent, knowledge of the broader social and cultural contexts of travel was variable. At the start of the course few students could name a favourite travel writer and even if they did read travel blogs, like much online travel reportage of the day those blog posts tended to feature personable, fleeting tales filed by short term voyeurs of a curious, but ultimately complex world. The travel reportage that emerges from this sort of tension can be resonant, or at times ridiculous.

As the historian and philosopher John Stilgoe argues, the acute observation and witnessing that travel inspires can open a path to broader knowledge. Nevertheless, media history is littered with stories of well-meaning travellers who assume that their own culture knows best without taking the time to check facts or question their own assumptions. Kony was an infamous example of the danger of discovering the limits of one's own perspective the hard way. That earnest 2012 social media campaign to oust a militia warlord stirred a backlash of rage worldwide.

Travel can be a revelatory experience, but to be transformative the differences between here and there generally seems to require some deeper consideration. In order for travel writers to go beyond simply broadcasting themselves and instead have more active conversations with multiple views of the world, the TWJ reading list included books by famous British adventurers (Fermor, Newby), as well as a female Australian writer who made a solo camel trek across the inhospitable Australian

desert (Davidson), a Vietnamese refugee struggling to find home (Pham), an Indigenous blogger furious about Western writers assuming the right to tell indigenous stories (Abdiel-Magied), alongside a comic book about a gay Indian super-hero princess, written by a young, female, Western artist (Weathington). Against this backdrop class discussions included the ethical considerations that accompany the spread of tourism, as well as the tensions that can complicate personal travel anecdotes in a world that is far from equal and riddled with prejudice.

Scaffolded by those discussions, the first assessment was a reflective writing assignment designed to encourage course participants to engage with these exemplary travel writings, as well as to prompt them to reflect more deeply upon the dialogue emerging from the variety of perspectives on hand.

- *When I arrived, I couldn't see in front of me for all the expectations stuffed inside my backpack. I was far from home and surrounded by strangers; I panicked. I became suspicious of everything unknown to me. Learning the value of difference was so far off my radar that irritation was my constant companion.*

In week seven of an eleven-week course participants were asked to write 2000 words reflecting upon the course reading and writing exercises that they had done thus far and to articulate what insights they had gained as a result.

- *I'd never really thought about whether it might NOT BE OK to reveal the world's hidden places before*
- *If I don't report it someone else will.*

(example response to a class debate about the ethics and impact of travel reporting)

This was an iterative process. Each week's homework included the prompt to regularly reflect upon course activities and consider their possible similarity, or contrast with prior experience. The final submission became a thematic summary of those reflections. The insights gained were also intended to feed forward in to the student's final writing assignment, so the writers were asked to conclude their reflective summary with a statement of how they planned to apply these newly discovered learnings in their final creative piece.

Effectively then, the assignment was a developmental challenge that had two parts: Students first needed to engage with the course materials and weekly journal exercises before they could later reflect upon that engagement. This was no accident. Similarly, the assignment included the requirement to submit an annotated bibliography, outlining what students liked, or didn't like about ten travel writing excerpts of their choice, sampled from the course reading list. To help focus these commentaries students were asked to discuss why and how those inspirational pieces might also influence their own writing. The annotations weren't assessed, but they did need to demonstrate a sincere engagement with the source text, which required a commentary upon, rather than a summary of the content. Engagement was key, framed by the prompt to think more deeply about the development of a personal writing practice within the context of this course.

Student engagement with the reflective writing challenge

Participants in the *Travel Writing and Journalism* module varied from novice writers keen to celebrate a sense of adventure, to those who had already secured magazine publication credits. Despite the challenges that such a wide range of skills and expectations can pose the course was designed to be as widely accessible as possible and yet still pose satisfying challenges. One of the strategies to achieve this reach was to keep the major assessment open to interpretation. For their final assignment, students were challenged to write an article (or equivalent, such as a rich media blog post, book excerpt, or spoken word performance) inspired by the theme of travel. As long as the student's submissions linked to a travel theme, they could choose to interpret that brief however they saw fit, setting their own focus, challenge, genre, audience and realisation strategy.

Whilst the open invitation for a creative and bold interpretation of the major assessment brief was generally welcomed by the students, the same can't be said of the first assignment which challenged the student travel writers to develop their thinking about the context of that work by reflecting upon their own engagement with the course readings, class activities and discussion themes. From the start it was apparent that few students were familiar with the reflective writing genre and even fewer seemed to enjoy the reflective writing process. At the end of the first class two accomplished writers complained that they had no idea what they were being asked to do. Both ended up being awarded firsts, but not without facing the anxiety of experimentation along the way.

When a teacher's career is informed by their student evaluation sheets the choice to include a potentially confusing assignment can be difficult. Each semester, the chance to overhaul the course was considered. Replacing a tricky assignment with a more straightforward and palatable challenge would likely impact student satisfaction ratings. Nevertheless, each semester the reflective writing exercise prompted at least a few startling insights: The early bloom of a new voice, or the intense processing of a past trauma were just some of those outcomes that kept the reflection process active, despite the challenges posed:

- *Trying to write about my travel experiences I suddenly realised how many were already forgotten...*
- *Did I already know that I wanted to change? Is that why I craved escape?*
- *Before my day trip to the Lakes District we read an article about it in class that made me think it would be overrun with tourists. It was busy, but the watery expanse somehow drowned out the crowds. The wind picked up and the clouds parted leaving a blue sky: a perfect day for snapshots.*

Thus, despite numerous misgivings the assignment remained and evolved over time. Each semester some part of the task was refined, some new attempt made to make it easier. As a result of these tweaks, what started off as an exploratory exercise became increasingly structured. The creative writing tutor sometimes struggled with

this change, such as when one of the students confessed how much they yearned for a tick the box kind of assessment. At the same time, as spontaneity studies writers like Keith Johnstone in his book *Impro* (Johnstone 2012) have pointed out the great irony of rules is that they can become the foundation of creative freedom. Whereas the empty page can be intimidating, the imposition of restrictions, like the set rules of a theatre game to do a specific thing within clear parameters, such as a series of short, physical gestures, created and mirrored amongst those assembled like a rhythmic call and response ritual, can become tools to rise above anxiety. Ultimately, rules support freedom. Thus, what began as an open-ended challenge to reflect upon the work undertaken in the course evolved (by request at times) in to a much more structured, step-by-step programme of creation and reflection. The assignment was broken in to prescribed sections, with defined word counts for each part, themes were nominated so that students could choose from a list, rather than devise their own and the most relevant readings for each theme were nominated along with a list of related questions to ponder. At one point a student complained that there were now so many different sections and word counts involved that they were being confused by the detail of it – so perhaps the fine-tuning process was never going to be complete. Nevertheless, with these restrictions in place students also seemed to gain confidence and start exploring.

- *To be honest, when I discovered that I was expected to blog in this module I groaned. The challenge to broadcast my own thoughts made me squirm. My first few posts were slow and laborious as I carefully structured them to say precious little about me. Over time, I realised that avoiding myself also avoided the chance to become a better writer.*

A turning point came when the tutor decided to give the students more foundational training. Preparatory email introductions soon included a link to a succinct online tutorial produced by the University on the reflective approach, whilst a large part of the first seminar was dedicated to an extended exploration of a type of mental processing that ‘lies somewhere around the notion of learning and thinking’ (Moon 2009: Resource 2). Jenny Moon has written widely about the nature of reflective writing and has also been generous enough to distribute introductory handouts designed to guide students in this more subjective approach. Her sample handouts which she has made publicly available outline the differences between descriptive and reflective writing (Moon 2009) and these can be used as a prompt to guide group evaluations of those variations. After dedicating at least half of the first class to this exercise one student shrugged their shoulders at the mere mention of reflective writing class as if to say, “yeah, I’ve got that”. The exercise stayed.

Even so, self-reflection is rarely an easy process. It takes courage to embrace the realisation that journeys in to the unknown are as likely to involve mistakes as much as fun and discovery, or contribution. Embracing the chance to learn from all of the above can be a humbling consolation. The lucky ones might gain a laugh, some of the time.

A safe writing space on the VLE (the module’s virtual learning environment, or blackboard) was the foundation of this process. Each week the course participants were encouraged to write in a private online course journal. At the end of each week’s class the tutor would pose creative writing challenges and set questions

about the content being discussed. Writers were also encouraged to free flow and follow their own muse. Story generation is part and parcel of the freelance writer's trade, so the tutor encouraged people to start generating their own story ideas. The open invitation to write according to inspiration was a deliberate invitation. There was no word limit in the journal, no assessable action beyond the tutor's occasional feedback and no requirement to share anything other than a 200 – 400 word excerpt of these combined writing efforts in the final reflective summary submission. Each writer could choose which excerpts to share, or not. The journals were sometimes prolific, often sporadic. Some were ignored for weeks until out of the blue they'd burst with commas and exclamation marks. Others became personal confessionals. Many were engaging and some were deeply profound.

- *It is tempting to spurt forth a nostalgic haze of souvenirs and passport stamps. But how can I confidently say that I know a place when all I really experienced was my dallying there? The world may seem real when you explore it, but what you see is a novelty and your stay is fleeting.*
- *Food is much more than a hiccup on the road. For people with specialist diets the fear of new things is very real.*

Peer review was fundamental to these reflective efforts. The private journal was partnered by a group discussion board, where students were encouraged to share short, anonymous writing tasks, such as the challenge to rewrite a sentence, or to caption shared photos of mystery locations (Given that most contemporary travel stories include rich media the course had a strong multimodal emphasis). Taking care to only emphasize the positives in such a public forum, the results were compared and discussed, at the end of which the students could cast secret votes for their favourite entry.

- *I hated sharing my work at first. As a hobby writer I felt like I was lagging behind my more experienced peers who readily dove in to class discussions about topics that were alien to me.*

Although novice writers were stressed by these communal comparisons, nevertheless at the same time they could find themselves reassured by it. For example, in one instance a new writer described themselves as a bad writer, only to be declared the winner of the class ballot five minutes later. In the end I concluded that facing the fear of comparison was an important step on the path to creative productivity. I shared these thoughts with the class, along with the reassurance that bad writing can never define a bad writer. Having enjoyed the privilege of looking on, stunned and delighted, as problematic student drafts transformed time and again in to veritable swans on the page I am now convinced that every draft ought to be treated with the faith it deserves.

Peer review writing workshops were scheduled at least four times within the TWJ course and the principle of keeping faith in the emerging draft was emphasised throughout. Numerous writers share distressing stories of a) never been able to write again, or b) needing to attend counselling after their involvement in 'critical' peer review groups that hadn't been properly trained in the art of giving and receiving feedback. In TWJ the tutor extensively role-modelled and workshoped the art of

giving and receiving feedback with the class before this process began – and in time that included the distribution of structured feedback forms that outlined specific questions for reviewers to consider. In the week leading up to the first peer review workshop the writers formed teams and were introduced to *The Guardian's* “Twitrip” reports. During twitrips across England local readers of *The Guardian* are invited to tweet the name of favourite haunts to a visiting *Guardian* journalist who takes their lead and in turn tweets about each new, recommended visit, before eventually compiling the results in to a travel article. When it came time for peer review each team was challenged to do the same: share and discover favourite spots on campus in real time, ideally followed by an informal group meet-up. No doubt some of those meetups included complaints about the reflective writing assignment, but most teams seemed to enjoy the activity and benefit through their associations.

- *The peer review exercise was a catalyst for me. Knowing that I was going to have my pieces critiqued inspired me to work even harder. Discovering that everybody else felt just as vulnerable as me turned critics in to friends. The feedback I received was helpful and I thank my peers for that.*

Despite its challenges, the assignment stuck and yielded rare and unique rewards – a bit like travel, a bit like life.

- *Numerous factors helped me to feel more like a writer: the discovery of shared fears and ultimately discovering (and exploring) my own interests.*
- *I talk to strangers now.*
- *Extensive self-analysis paid off. As well as identifying areas for improvement, I found ways to improve my writing, which I then enacted.*

Am I happy with the results? Absolutely

Would I do it differently next time? Let me think on that.

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