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The 'Start Writing Fiction' MOOC: Teaching a class of twenty-five thousand.

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The *Start Writing Fiction* MOOC: Teaching a Class of Twenty Five Thousand

In April 2014 The Open University launched its *Start Writing Fiction* MOOC. It was the UK's first large scale creative writing open course and attracted 25,000 would-be writers. It has since gone on to present twice annually – October 2015 will see its fourth run, and it is scheduled for presentations in April and October 2016 and beyond. Each presentation remarkably attracts similar numbers to that first run. It is open to all-comers from around the world, attracting students from a vast array of nations – including the US, Canada, India, Ukraine, Italy, Spain, Germany, Australia, Iraq, China – as well as all parts of the UK, ranging from existing Open University and other HE writing students to non-HE-affiliated writers, including creative writing A-Level students. But what is a MOOC? What does the course consist of? How does it manage to teach so many students? Is it really free? Is this a rival model of creative writing teaching, one that threatens our livelihoods by doing away with the notion of practitioner-teacher and the relatively intimate workshop setting and its collaborative exchange of work?

The term MOOC is an acronym (mass open online course) imported from the US where such platforms as Coursera and edX host courses from a range of esteemed universities, including Harvard, Princeton, Stanford and Yale, along with many international institutions. As with most MOOCs, *Start Writing Fiction* is completely free. You can pay to get a certificate of participation if you wish, but this is not obligatory or necessary in order to complete the course. The platform used by the OU is FutureLearn, which serves as a platform for many other institutions, in a similar vein to the American models; it hosts courses from universities across the UK mainly, but increasingly from international institutions as well. It also hosts courses for institutions such as The British Council and The British Museum. Some universities have their own MOOCs without using a platform – for instance, Iowa, the most prestigious creative writing university in the US offers excellent fiction and poetry courses, and in the UK The Open University offer direct fiction and poetry courses from its OpenLearn sites (see links at the end of this article).

Start Writing Fiction is based on part of a former first year degree OU short online course of the same name, and is focused primarily on developing character in order to start writing stories and novels. The MOOC substantially re-works elements of that original course to accommodate the fact of so many students and the absence of small teaching groups, but also in order to fit the unique platform of FutureLearn. The course runs for 8 weeks and is set up in a way that will seem familiar to anyone who has taught creative writing. There are six main approaches within the course. Students learn to write:

- through writing – by trying it themselves
- through reading – character sketches and sections from novels and stories by established writers and also the work of fellow learners
- by developing powers of observation and using a writer's notebook to generate ideas
- by learning how, when and why to edit and redraft work
- by listening to the testimony of other writers and how they approach their work

- through discussion with fellow learners – about draft work and editing and also about current or relevant reading.

Students' work isn't read or assessed by a tutor but there are three peer review assignments where students submit work to be read by each other, so developing the key skills of critiquing work-in-progress, the skills which so enhance and accelerate a writer's development. The course includes audio interviews and discussion from novelists Michèle Roberts, Louis de Bernières, Monique Roffey, Abdulrazak Gurnah, Alex Garland, Patricia Duncker and Tim Pears. It also includes readings and excerpts from writers such as Graham Greene, Zoë Heller, Toni Morrison, and Kate Atkinson.

Each week is designed to take three hours, but keen writers inevitably take more time than that. The weeks are divided into a number of learning steps, involving reading, writing, editing, redrafting, videos, screencasts, audios, quizzes, critiquing and discussion. Each step is interactive – students undertake the activity but can also post comments and discuss with one another about how they approach tasks and about their writing in general. Inevitably some learners post their writing directly into these comment sections, as well as in the more official discussion and assignment activities. In fact the creative writing students – always in search of a reader - proved prolific in their social tendencies. The leaders of an OU science course told me that they were delighted with 5,000 postings in the first week of their MOOC. On *Start Writing Fiction* there were more than 5,000 postings by lunchtime on the first day, and by the end of the 8 weeks there had been nearly 150,000 postings.

Four facilitators and two affiliate guides – all writers who have taught and studied the subject - looked over proceedings, one observing that it felt like crowd surfing at a festival, so high were the levels of enthusiasm and creative energy. There was an overriding feeling that the learners were pleased to be there, happy to be writing, to be reading and talking about characters and stories and ways of writing. But for those teachers facilitating the MOOC it was nothing like normal teaching; the festival analogy was apt – a good deal of their work consisted of pointing students in particular directions, reassuring them, signposting and helping them find their way amid the online crowds. There was little time for conventional tutor-student direct conversation about a particular piece of work; there were just too many students, too many pieces of work. This highlighted several things: how precious and important that sort of specific and focused conversation is and how this type of teaching just can't offer that type of facilitation. But it also illuminated some of the many other aspects and attributes of creative writing study – in particular how social it is and can be, and how it lends itself to a highly independent mode of study. When working well it empowers students by getting them to write under their own steam, by making them to produce literature; they do it themselves and initiate conversations and discussions about it themselves.

The down side – MOOCs don't retain students in the way that conventional writing courses do. In the US, MOOCs are reputed to have retention rates of around 5%. *Start Writing Fiction* – typical of FutureLearn MOOCs – has much higher retention rates than that. The first presentation, for instance, was probably more in the region of 10-15%, but

these things are difficult to pin down. Even this aspect isn't a clear-cut negative. How is it possible to know when a student has completed the course and been retained? How is it possible to know when students have left the course? The website containing all the learning materials stays open in perpetuity and some students return, linger or carry on at their own pace. The thing that such students miss out on is the likelihood of exchanges in their postings, and they may well struggle to get feedback on the peer review assignments. There will be no facilitators or guides around after the 8 weeks is up, but I recently looked back at the website for the first run of *Start Writing Fiction* and found that student writers were still posting up messages eighteen months after the course began. Students use the MOOC in very different ways – some as a linear, calendar-based course, some as an online resource. In this light the retention figure looks rather unreliable and possibly irrelevant, and in any case, as a colleague recently pointed out, 10% of 25,000 is still quite a number of would-be writers by most people's standards.

The making of the MOOC led to some fruitful ways of thinking in terms of educational design and to some unlikely successes. I thought quizzes would be ruled out because of the propensity of all Humanities and Arts subjects, let alone creative writing, towards no clear cut yes-no answers to major questions. I was pleasantly surprised. We found that online quizzes were an ideal way of rounding up thoughts on certain literary illustrations, an interactive way of giving extra information and training to learners about how to read particular passages as a writer. We found that the use of screencasts – animated text with a voice over - were especially useful for showing editing in action. We used a brief video of everyday life to start the course and the investigation of character, and weekly videos to continue at least some level of face-contact throughout the course. We used a new computer-led method of distributing work for critiquing and peer-review which had its flaws, and is still in need of development, but which overall was incomparably better that more antiquated methods of distribution – I'm thinking of not so very long ago and standing by the photocopier, making copies for all.

Some of the statistics on participation are general and vary to an extent from presentation to presentation. However, it's fair to say that in line with most creative writing study there has been a majority of women studying the course. Up to 70% of learners already have a first degree and over 30% of them were international students based outside of the UK, with noticeable contingents from the US, central Europe and India. In many ways the business model isn't yet settled for MOOCs – universities are yet to ascertain exactly how they make money from free courses. But a consensus is rising fast, suggesting that MOOCs are a focused marketing tool for paid qualifications and courses; they help recruit students, not only for the institution that provides the MOOC but for the subject area more generally. My reflections on *Start Writing Fiction* are that it promotes Creative Writing in the first instance, as well as fulfilling an obligation common to many Higher Education Institutions - to provide some free learning resources to the public. This certainly ties in with the OU's OpenLearn facilities.

As a teacher I'm familiar with fighting to keep class and workshop sizes down. I recall feeling very proud at a former place of employment in maintaining scriptwriting groups at a maximum of 12, because of the rehearsal time needed. And yet here I am talking of

25,000 students per presentation. I don't see this as a contradiction. Watching the *Start Writing Fiction* MOOC come into being and meet its first students has been scary and exhilarating. Several things should be emphasised about this apparently revolutionary development in creative writing teaching. Firstly, writing and writers are, and should be, still at the centre of such courses. It takes writers and those who have taught creative writing to make and facilitate such a MOOC. It would be impossible without them. My own view is that despite the numbers MOOCs attract and nurture would-be writers in a strangely intimate fashion, in the same way that a festival is both a mass event and a very personal experience. Such MOOCs are a new tool in helping writers find confidence and in nudging those who are willing and able towards taking credit-bearing study at whatever level. It performs these functions in a vibrant and healthy manner, one which does not take students away from conventional creative writing study or turn the teaching of writing into a mechanical or purely online process. It points towards the virtue and advantages of the workshop and personal conversations about work rather than replacing such conversations.

In the long run I think MOOCs will increase student numbers in paid courses; in the subject area of creative writing this will mean more jobs for practitioner-teachers. I think such MOOCs do not threaten the role of the writer in creative writing study, because from my knowledge and experience of *Start Writing Fiction,* the MOOC method is premised on many of the methods used in conventional workshop teaching. In many ways it amplifies, and offers samples of, the virtues of workshop teaching – and shares the egalitarian approach towards literature and writing that is embodied in the whole creative writing venture.

This article is based in part on a presentation made at the 2014 NAWE conference in Bristol. The next presentations of the *Start Writing Fiction* MOOC begins on October 12 2015 and April 4 2016 (not forgetting that you, your students and fellow writers are welcome to join the course after a presentation has started). See:
https://www.futurelearn.com/courses/start-writing-fiction

To view some free OpenLearn Creative Writing resources, see the following links:

Fiction http://www.open.edu/openlearn/history-the-arts/culture/literature-and-creative-writing/creative-writing/start-writing-fiction/content-section-0

Poetry http://www.open.edu/openlearn/history-the-arts/culture/literature-and-creative-writing/literature/what-poetry/content-section-0

Drama http://www.open.edu/openlearn/history-the-arts/culture/literature-and-creative-writing/start-writing-plays

Writers in Interview http://www.open.edu/openlearn/history-the-arts/culture/literature-and-creative-writing/creative-writing-0