

Review by Jarryd Luke

Creative Writing in the Digital Age: Theory, Practice, and Pedagogy

Incorporating digital media into creative writing classes is both an exciting and daunting concept for many teachers. Researchers have pointed to the increasing demand for such courses as definitions of what can be considered “creative writing” continue to expand beyond the page. However, there are still comparatively few established methods for introducing new technologies into the creative writing classroom, and for some teachers it remains an intimidating challenge. Writer and teacher Christina Clancy (166) states that, as storytelling continues to evolve, “I didn’t want to be left behind. And I didn’t want my students to be left behind, either. Or, rather, I worried my students were already “there” ... I wanted to embrace multimodal forms of writing, but I lacked confidence.”

Creative Writing in the Digital Age: Theory, Practice, and Pedagogy offers many potential jumping-off points for creative writing instructors who are considering how to integrate digital media into their pedagogy in a meaningful way. The authors of the 14 essays in the collection describe and reflect on projects that instructors are invited to experiment with in their own classes. Ample practical details and examples are provided for the reader to replicate the projects if they choose, mostly without the need for extensive technical knowledge. The essays cover an impressive range of media and software that can be combined with more traditional literary studies, ranging from posts on social media such as Twitter and Facebook to digital storytelling or video lectures made with iMovie and Windows Media Maker, to interactive fiction programmed with Inform 7 and Twine. Such projects are clearly described, with valuable suggestions about how to implement them and useful resources at the end of each essay.

The authors give honest and measured accounts of their digital projects, sharing both their successes and failures and reflecting on the challenges they faced. Courses or assignments that were rewarding for teachers and students were often preceded by trial and error, and in some cases several iterations of the course, which were not as well received. For

example, in “Lost in Digital Translation: Navigating the Online Creative Writing Classroom”, Joseph Rein describes the steep learning curve he navigated when using online discussions in his classes for the first time, “attempting to recreate the *human* elements, the personal connections so prevalent, so necessary, to the traditional creative writing classroom” (91). While Rein discovered that the immediacy and spontaneity of face-to-face learning could not always be replicated online, he also found that online debates “democratise the workshop” (93), giving all students an opportunity to contribute and allowing them to consider their feedback more carefully before sharing it. Such discussions of the occasional frustrations that went into adapting the authors’ pedagogy are enlightening and no doubt will be relatable for many teachers.

The descriptions of successful classes are perhaps more inspiring and authentic because they are accompanied by these honest discussions of their accompanying challenges. Many of the authors agree with Anna Leahy and Douglas Dechow’s claim that “digital projects encouraged a heightened state of awareness in my students, an immersion in and sustained focus on poetry” (41). The authors point to the ways that digital media encourages students to look at creative writing in new ways, fashioning different kinds of texts using a variety of tools. For example, in “Game Spaces: Videogames as Story-generating Systems for Creative Writers”, Trent Hergenrader, whose course asks students to analyse videogames as primary texts and engage with collaborative world-building exercises and tabletop role-playing games, states that, “while print literature might be the preferred medium for most English instructors, we should respect the media preferences of our students. Our goal should be to deepen their appreciation for literature and literary writing as one of many modes of artistic expression rather than arguing for the cultural superiority of the printed text” (46).

Similarly, Aaron A. Reed notes that “crafting good interactive stories is a unique form of constrained writing that challenges students to strengthen their traditional writing muscles in unique and surprising ways” (141). There are many intriguing examples of how digital technologies can shed new light on established writing practices: editing video rather than text can make it easier for students to visually pinpoint where their work needs improvement (174), while software such as Microsoft Word can make feedback more effective by allowing users to track changes and leave comments (96). In “Creative Writing for New Media,” Amy Letter states that there are more similarities between teaching “digital” and “traditional” creative writing than there are differences, and that “experience teaching traditional writing

courses, combined with an enthusiasm for technology and experimentation, is all that is required to begin teaching in this field” (179), as long as students and teachers alike are open to technical challenges and set realistic goals.

Creative Writing in the Digital Age also describes student reactions to digital media tasks, describing how they respond to new types of assignments and classroom dynamics. This includes creative writing students who may already participate in a wide variety of digital media and are interested in new methods of storytelling, as well as students from other disciplines such as game design who want to learn more about the craft of writing. The book includes extracts from and examples of student work, giving the reader valuable insight into what outcomes they could expect in their own classes.

Some of the essays describe classes that are mainly online, while most adopt a “hybrid” combination of face-to-face and online activities, tailoring the strengths of each delivery style to different tasks. In many cases, this allows the instructor to open up or extend existing workshop models with new technologies. For example, in “Concentration, Form, and Ways of (Digitally) Seeing,” Anna Leahy and Douglas Dechow discuss the benefits of assigning tasks that incorporate digital technologies to further the existing goals of the course. Digital technology is often seen as distracting writers rather than fostering “deep sea diving,” but Leahy and Dechow ask, “how could digital modes foster concentration, not distraction?” (29). In particular, they describe an assignment where students posted daily poems on blogs. Altering the format of the course’s poetry portfolio in this way “could serve my pedagogical approach, not merely substitute for what I was already doing well in my courses” (36).

In their introduction, the editors point out that “creative writing remains more doggedly reliant on, and rooted in, print culture than almost any other discipline” (2), while further on in the book, Trent Hergenrader adds that, “rather than wringing our hands over an imaginary cultural decline, creative writing instructors can lead the way to the future” (57). The challenges and rewards of expanding the creative writing workshop to include digital media are perhaps best summarised by Christina Clancy in “The Text is Where it’s at: Digital Storytelling Assignments that Teach Lessons in Creative Writing.” After building up the courage to set digital stories for assessment, Clancy found that “digital and multimodal forms of storytelling ... can ultimately lead students back to the text as a sort of warm-up for deep engagement with traditional narrative, readying them for the challenge of writing the personal

essay and the eight-page short story we are accustomed to teaching” (167). She describes digital storytelling as a “circling back to the text rather than a shift away” (167), a sentiment that is echoed throughout this essay collection.

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