Your class is online now: Now What? How Online Creative Writing Can Offer a More Democratic Space and a Few Specific Examples

Jason McCall

University of North Alabama, jmccall2@una.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://ir.una.edu/eng_facpub

Part of the Creative Writing Commons

Recommended Citation

McCall, J. (2020). Your class is online now: Now What? How Online Creative Writing Can Offer a More Democratic Space and a Few Specific Examples. Retrieved from https://ir.una.edu/eng_facpub/1

This Conference Proceeding is brought to you for free and open access by the English at UNA Scholarly Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in Faculty Publications by an authorized administrator of UNA Scholarly Repository. For more information, please contact jptate1@una.edu.
Your class is online now: Now What? How Online Creative Writing Can Offer a More Democratic Space and a Few Specific Examples

Colleagues,

Though the circumstances are much different, my move to online creative writing was not by choice. I started my current position at the University of North Alabama in fall 2017, and six weeks into my first semester, I was told our university wanted to expand our online course offerings, and the English Department looked to the Professional Writing faculty to carry much of this responsibility.

Like Many of us, I came through a traditional MFA program (the University of Miami), and all of my undergraduate and graduate creative writing courses were traditional, face-to-face courses. So naturally, my first fear related to how I could replicate the face-to-face experience in an online environment. How could students navigate class readings without classroom discussions? How could workshops be valuable without the spontaneous and generative nature of a class discussion?

However, the more I investigated how to recreate the face-to-face classroom in an online environment, I began to question what parts of the face-to-face classroom I really wanted to recreate. The creative writing classroom can be a site of magic, and I don’t use that term loosely. One of the biggest joys as a teacher has come from watching students develop their critical and creative voices. Watching students who struggled to express their ideas in the first weeks of the class become discussion leaders by the end of the semester never gets old. And it never gets old seeing the friendships and trust that grows in a face-to-face creative writing classroom.

But along the potential for this magic, there is also potential for abuse. And I have worked on creating online creative writing courses for the last three years, one of my main goals has been to create an online writing space that limits these abuses.

The face-to-face classroom can be a space of emotional abuse. It can be a space of bullying and intimidation. Voices are pushed aside and silenced while other voices are celebrated and held up as examples for the class. Specifically, the face-to-face classroom can often be a hostile space for students coming from marginalized backgrounds. The backgrounds can be related to, but not limited to, race, economic status, gender, sexuality, or educational background.

The online creative writing classroom can avoid these abuses. When every voice is given the same font and format on the class discussion board, it becomes more difficult for one voice to crowd out another voice. When students are allowed to record videos to introduce their work, students can speak without interruptions. When bodies are removed from the classroom, some of the pressure and stereotypes placed on these bodies are removed as well. It becomes harder for minority students to be pressured to speak for all minorities. In the online writing class, students have more room to be viewed as writers first, and, in many ways, the online writing classroom allows students to have more autonomy to choose how much they wish to align with a specific identity or community during their time in the class.
With community in mind, I believe this conversation is very important as we consider the potential of digital spaces in our communities. Many of our colleagues have restricted travel and social activities due to the current health crisis and the uncertainties that have come along with it. However, the writing classroom and writing community has often acted as a threat to many bodies. We are asked to move our bodies to new paces for conferences, fellowships, and academic programs. This movement often places our bodies in environments that can be alien to us. Also, this movement is expensive even with some form of institutional support. The economic, emotional, and social costs of being a writer can be very high. I believe the online classroom can lessen these threats for the community. Writers can avoid the burdens of moving our bodies into spaces that might not welcome us, and writers can avoid some of the costs associated with relocation.

These values of the online writing classroom create a more democratic classroom and create more room for writers to find their identities in the writing community.

Practical issues:

For help with what an online creative writing class can look like, I’ve pasted examples of what a unit description, weekly assignment, and workshop assignment look like in my online creative writing courses:

**Unit example: (Workshop groups are normally 5-6 students)**

**Poetry Workshop Overview**

Workshop Overview

This unit addresses M.A. in Writing Objectives 1 and 2:

1. Prepare students for expanded careers in writing which occur in various professional, academic, technical, and creative communities.
2. Prepare students for the pursuit of terminal degrees as researchers and academics.

This unit addresses Course Level Objectives 1 and 2:

1. Produce and revise work suitable for publication in the genres of poetry and creative nonfiction.
2. Evaluate contemporary writers and contemporary trends and movements in poetry and creative nonfiction.

Module Objectives:
1. Create poems suitable for workshop submission and discussion (Course Objective 1)
2. Evaluate the poems created by other students (Course Objective 2)

This unit is our first poetry workshop unit. The workshop environment gives you an opportunity to receive feedback on your work, but it also gives you an opportunity to learn from other writers in the class. In my classroom, the workshop space is a generative space. I want this space to be a space where students feel the freedom to experiment with new forms and stretch their boundaries as writers and readers.

**Read:** In this unit, you will read the poems submitted for workshop and read Hari Alluri’s *The Flayed City*. The order will be as follows:

Week 2: Group 1 workshop poems and section one of *The Flayed City*.

Week 3: Group 2 workshop poems and section two of *The Flayed City*.

Week 4: Group 3 workshop poems and section three of *The Flayed City*.

**Create:** In this unit, you will upload a 2-3 minute video introduction to the poems you chose to workshop. In this video, you will explain your favorite poem out of the group you submitted, and you will ask for workshop feedback in one specific area of another poem. To upload your video, you will use the Kaltura media tool in Canvas. A PDF guide for using Kaltura can be found here:

Submit your three poems (1 form, 1 poem inspired by a poem from the week’s section of *The Flayed City*, 1 poem with no restrictions) by 5pm Wednesday. For the poem inspired by *The Flayed City*, be sure to give the title of the poem you used as inspiration in a note after your poem. The poems should be attached as a Word-compatible (doc./rtf) or pdf. document onto the workshop discussion board. Attach your poems as a reply in this discussion thread. Upload your work and your video as a reply to this post.

**Respond:** Every student must write a 150 word response for each writer being workshopped. For the response, focus on three elements: successes of the piece, challenges for the author, and feedback on the author’s requested area. First, focus on successful elements of the piece (speaker/voice, diction, setting, tone, form, theme, pacing, atmosphere, etc.). And based on those successes, describe what challenges you have for the writer. How do you think the writer can build on the successes present in the piece? Finally, give feedback on the area that the writer requested feedback for in the video introduction. Your workshop responses must address these areas to receive credit. Post your response as a reply to the writer’s discussion board submission.

Also, students who are being workshopped each week will write a 200 word critical response for two poems the week’s section of *The Flayed City*.

Links to the assignments for this unit are below:
Week 2
Group 1 Workshop Submission
Group 2 and *The Flayed City* Responses

Week 3
Group 1 Workshop Responses
Group 2 Workshop Submission
Group 1 and 3 *The Flayed City* Responses

Week 4
Group 2 Workshop Responses
Group 3 Workshop Submission
Group 1 and 2 *The Flayed City* Responses

Week 5
Group 3 Workshop Responses

**Reading response example:** (For reading responses, I ask students to focus on how specific poems or specific elements of a piece of prose help them as writers. I ask students to be more intentional and more selfish as readers.)

Group 1:
Submit your 200 word response for the first section of *The Flayed City* here. Your response will deal with two poems from the first section of the book. Your response should discuss the successful elements of the poems and why these poems were appealing to you as a reader/writer. Upload your work as a Word-Compatible file.

**Weekly creative response:** (This response comes from a class on ekphrastic poetry and nonfiction:

After reading p. 3-115 of *To Repel Ghosts: The Remix*, complete your creative response.
In *To Repel Ghosts: The Remix*, Young focuses on Jean Michel Basquiat on p. 3-40, and he focuses on the art of sports in p. 43-115. The major goals of your response are below:

Complete two poems following these directions:

Poem 1: Many of Young's poems are responses to art. For the first poem, write a response to one of your favorite pieces of art. This art can come from any medium. Use the title to identify the piece of art in the same way that Young identifies the art in the title of his poems. There are no restrictions on the style or form for this poem.

Poem 2: The poems in p. 43-115 focus on how issues of art and culture are reflected through sports and famous athletes. Sports are not often considered to be poetic. With that in mind, write a poem about someone in an occupation, sports or otherwise, that is often not thought of as artistic or poetic. Use a poetic form from the Poetic Forms page.

Upload your work as a Word-Compatible file.

Finally, please be aware of accessibility issues. Some online platforms have accessibility checkers built in. All universities hopefully have accessibility guidelines available.

Also, I designed my courses for students who knew they were going to take an online class. Those students planned to have regular, reliable internet access. Many of our students might not have that when they are moved off campus.

I hope this helps some of my colleagues as you move your courses online. If you have questions about this, or if I can help in any way, please email me (jmccall2@una.edu).