"Learning from weakness is also valuable": A reflection on digital peer writing workshops held during the COVID-19 pandemic

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Abstract

In 2019, I refreshed a tertiary writing unit in which, across two assignments, students planned and then produced their own creative non-fiction work. Peer workshopping was an important pedagogical tool to help students bridge the gap between their creative non-fiction plan and their final submission. In the discipline of Writing, peer workshopping is central to students' degrees, allowing them to develop a collective wisdom that is difficult to replicate in digital learning environments. My regional institution offers "digital first" degrees, and around 90% of my students learn online. Therefore, I created workshops online in asynchronous, written form, to suit our cohort of mostly mature age students with many commitments alongside study. During the unit, many students expressed troubles in using online programs such as Google Docs, prompting me to reflect on how to best meet their learning needs. Students took part in focus groups, which formed the basis of my subsequent revision of the digital workshops in the unit's 2021 iteration. The need for digital adaptations of disciplinary pedagogies became even more broadly relevant by 2021, as more universities moved online during the pandemic in an Emergency Remote Learning response, and many remain online post-pandemic. Reflecting on my improved 2021 workshops, I ask, how can the writing workshop be successfully replicated in an asynchronous digital space? My response will reflect on 2021 survey feedback on the outcomes of my revisions in digital skills instruction and managing students' time investment.

Practitioner Notes

1. When using digital tools for writing workshops, it is important to use those already known by students to lessen the burden of learning new technologies.
2. Online writing workshops take longer than on-campus ones, but students also gain more experience in writing. On-campus workshops are also more useful if students write their peer feedback down.
3. Online assessments can be completed asynchronously and flexibly, rather than replicating an exact on-campus experience, as research shows online students prefer asynchronous learning.
4. Online students should be offered opportunities for important peer-to-peer social interaction. They have expressed a sense of "missing out" on what on-campus students are offered socially.
5. When designing online activities, rather than being prescriptive, it is best to adapt the design based on student cohort, the institution's technologies, the subject, and the teaching strengths of the educator.

Keywords

Peer Workshops, Digital Writing, COVID-19 Pandemic, Higher Education (HE), Emergency Remote Learning (ERL)

Introduction

Scientists argue that pandemics have become more likely due to climate change, causing not only death but also widespread social change (Mora et al., 2022; Tanzi 2022, pp. 37-130; Rodó et al., 2021). Many tertiary institutions around the world temporarily moved to online teaching and learning in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, yet the increasing risk of pandemics and catastrophes suggests the value of continued preparation for future emergency remote learning (ERL). Scholars have conducted studies on the impacts of ERL on students and academics in places such as Hong Kong (Law et al., 2022), Cyprus (Meletiou-Mavrotheris et al., 2022, p. 20), Japan (Miller, 2022), and Australia (Stewart & Khan, 2021). Even before the pandemic, scholars (Palvia et al., 2018) argued that there would be an increasing trend toward flexible learning in universities, including online learning. A common thread linking these scholars' research is that, as university teachers, we should share our challenges and solutions to circulate strategies for more ERL. In that spirit, I share here my experiences developing digital adaptations of a pedagogy familiar to scholars of Writing Studies – the peer workshop – and how these were strengthened through student feedback during and after the pandemic.

In 2019, I refreshed a tertiary Writing Studies unit in which, across two assessments, students planned and then produced their own creative non-fiction work. Peer workshopping was an important pedagogical tool to help students bridge the gap between their creative non-fiction plan and their final submission. In the discipline of Writing Studies, peer workshopping is central to students' degrees (Cosgrove, 2018), allowing them to develop a kind of "collective wisdom" (Leahy, 2007, p. 66) that is difficult to replicate in digital learning environments. My regional institution offers "digital first" degrees, and around ninety percent of students learn online. Many of these students are mature-age (i.e., over twenty-five-years-old) and have commitments outside study such as work and caring responsibilities. Therefore, I created workshops online in asynchronous, written form. This asynchronous replication disadvantages online students through a lack of interactive communication.

During the 2019 unit, many students expressed troubles in using online programs such as Google Docs, prompting me to reflect on how to best meet their learning needs in the digital space. Students took part in focus groups (HE19-174) and the results formed the basis of my subsequent revision of the digital workshops in the unit's 2021 iteration. The need for digital adaptations of disciplinary pedagogies became even more broadly relevant by 2021, as universities moved fully online in a response to the pandemic, and many remain fully or partially online post-pandemic. Using my workshops as a case study and responses to a 2021 student survey (HE21-124), I ask how can the writing workshop be effectively replicated in the digital space? My response particularly focuses on revisions in technologies and managing students' time investment, and refers to qualitative anonymous student responses.

Literature

Emergency Remote Learning

Studies have shown that ERL during the COVID-19 pandemic had certain benefits for students. In Law et al.'s (2022) study of online learning in Hong Kong, they found that it was cost-effective, gave students flexibility in their course choices (p. 2), and, in some cases, was preferable for introverted or anxious students (p. 8). Universities UK released a report that demonstrated that ERL "coincided with a narrowing of attainment gaps between females and males, students with and without disabilities and White and Black students" (Arday, 2022, pp. 367-368). For these reasons, it is important for educators to consider how to best implement digital learning strategies that can reduce inequalities between their students.

Online learning also introduces complex challenges. Composition scholars have long written about the complication of instructions in online Writing Studies (Peckham, 1996, p. 334), and the lack of teacher-student interaction (Hawisher & Selfe, 1991). Studies highlight that large numbers of students experienced excessive workloads during the pandemic (Meletiou-Mavrotheris et al., 2022, p. 13) and that online learning suits students who are self-organised and motivated (Law et al., 2022, p. 4). In ERL classes, students reported that they lost valuable learning interactions with their peers (Law et al., 2022, p. 9) and their teachers (Meletiou-Mavrotheris et al., 2022, p. 20). Importantly for scholarship and teaching that uses peer workshops, studies claim that online learning environments make group work difficult and time-consuming (Law et al., 2022, p. 10) and lack opportunities for important peer-to-peer social interactions (Meletiou-Mavrotheris et al., 2022, p. 20).

This literature suggests that educators may be able to design their courses so that the benefits of online learning – flexibility and improved equality of learning outcomes – are harnessed, and the challenges, namely a lack of interaction and difficulty managing time, are mitigated. Many studies approach this topic, but advice tends to require the educator reflecting on their own knowledge of their student cohort, their institution's digital learning environment, the best practice of their discipline, and their own skills and competencies. Stewart & Khan advocate for teaching academics to use a "digital mindset" which they define as "ways of thinking and meaning creation developed over time through contextual interactions and personal relationships within a digital landscape" (2021, p. 346). On the other hand, the roles and competencies outlined by Ní Shé et al. (2019) for the implementation of online learning cannot be achieved by an academic alone, and require support and action from students, institutions, and even from education policymakers. This article cannot respond to those levels of support, which fall outside the scope of the primary research obtained through student surveys. Instead, I focus herein on the academic teacher's design of writing workshops in the digital space.

Peer Writing Workshops

An important disciplinary pedagogical tool in Writing Studies is the peer workshop. The discipline's traditional peer workshop – developed in 1935 by Norman Foerster and run at the University of Iowa – was held face-to-face in small groups, with students typically listening to the student-writer read their work, and then providing critical feedback as a group. In the contemporary Australian university, students consider these peer workshops as central to their degrees (Cosgrove, 2018).

The tertiary Writing Studies workshop allows students to understand their writing not as an individual pursuit, but as a process of reading, drafting, and revising (Bunn, 2015). Students develop a "collective wisdom" (Leahy, 2007, p. 66). However, in contemporary tertiary institutions, particularly during ERL, workshops often cannot follow the traditional model of a small group of face-to-face peers, and instead need to be facilitated in a digital space with large groups and minimal instructor oversight.

The value of peer learning has long been recognised (Dewey, 1966; Piaget, 1959; Vygotsky, 1967). When students provide their peers with writing feedback, they develop social skills (Bunn, 2015; Cosgrove, 2018; Glover, 2010) and they also engage more thoroughly with their own metacognitive skills in writing (Li & Steckelberg 2006; Van Popta et al., 2017). Further, research has demonstrated that when students feel engaged in their learning and with their peers, attrition becomes less likely (Crosling et al., 2009). Therefore, particularly following ERL during the COVID-19 pandemic, it makes economic sense for universities to implement valuable digital pedagogies that allow students to feel the benefits of their on-campus learning in the online environment.

Case Study and Method

While scholars have agreed that the peer workshop is central to the discipline and student experiences, it has been argued that Writing Studies teachers need to change their practices using the unique affordances offered by digital media (Williams, 2015). In 2019, I brought this digital mindset to my revision of a creative non-fiction Writing Studies unit, including in the design of a peer workshopping assessment. While on-campus students could complete this assessment under instructor supervision following the traditional Iowa model, ninety percent of the cohort (88 students) were enrolled online. The online students could self-enrol into small groups in the unit's Learning Management System (LMS) site, choosing a group in the genre of creative non-fiction they were writing. Each group had a designated discussion forum and students followed weekly instructions to share their draft creative works as Google Docs and give each other feedback in their group's forum. This task equated to ten percent of their overall unit grade. Although students found the task beneficial to their learning, many were unfamiliar with Google Docs and were uncertain about giving peer feedback. Their time spent understanding the technology and task was not proportionate with the small grade allocation. Some online students spent many hours to complete an activity that took on-campus students one hour face-to-face. With these challenges in mind, I applied for ethics approval (HE 19-174) to facilitate anonymous focus groups to discover ways of improving the student experience while maintaining the integrity of the Writing Studies workshop. Findings from those 2019 focus groups demonstrated that students participating in digital peer workshopping benefit from: clear boundaries and limits on time; familiar and simple technologies; asynchronous engagement; and a guide for how to give peer feedback (Pâquet & Van Luyn, 2022). A challenge faced by the research team was that we had very low interest from participants, with only four students joining the focus group, while the majority of our online cohort could not contribute because of competing work and family commitments. Basically, the cohort could not take part in focus groups at set times for the same reasons they cannot take part in synchronous online peer workshops.

Determined to revise the workshopping task for further improved outcomes for the 128 students enrolled in the creative non-fiction writing unit in its next iteration in 2021, I revised the workshopping assessment, confining the workshops to two weeks to aid students' learning without the task becoming onerous. Students could share Word documents of their creative works in their group's discussion forum (capped at a maximum of four members per group). Their constructive feedback was guided by a Peer Feedback Form I created and shared with them. The form was a simple editable table in a Word document that asked for relevant comments on strengths and areas for improvement for different narrative techniques (including characterisation, dialogue, setting, description, and structure) and inclusion of research. This form was created to steer peer feedback into areas of larger-order revisions rather than lower-order editorial comments. Students could use familiar technologies such as Microsoft Word and LMS discussion forums, which lessened the burden of learning new technologies such as Google Docs. The assessment allocation remained set as ten percent of the final grade but its completion status was amended to optional. Students who were opposed to group work could then forgo the ten percent, although only a small minority of the cohort opted out of the assessment.

Following completion of the revised unit in 2021, I applied for another round of ethics approval (HE21-124) to conduct an anonymous survey of students that asked short answer qualitative questions about the workshops (Appendix 1). A survey was chosen as the primary research method so that more participants from the online cohort could contribute, and to lessen the burden of time on those participants. The survey aimed to understand the student experience of the digital workshops, what they found difficult, what they enjoyed, and what they felt was missing. Twenty-five questions were asked with the expectation that it would take ten to twenty minutes for participants to respond, considering that participants would need to type out short, qualitative responses to each question. Participants had the option to stop at any time, and to leave responses blank. Twenty-three participants submitted responses, a small but significant number of the 2021 cohort, with responses representing a range of opinions.

Questions asked in the survey ranged from ascertaining why students chose Writing Studies units and their expectations, a middle section on digital peer workshopping, and a closing section on writing in the genre of creative non-fiction (See Appendix 1). For this article's analysis in a special issue on higher education and digital writing in a post-pandemic world, I conducted a mixed-method approach using the survey responses and a case study of the unit's revisions of digital writing workshops. Discussion of the survey questions analysed (Q3, 5, 6, 9, 10, 12-19, and 22) aid Writing Studies academics' learning design of online peer workshopping, with particular focus on the challenges identified in my literature review, namely:

- Reducing inequalities between students
- The time constraints of online group work
- The lack of social peer-to-peer interaction

Because of the variability in academics' institutional support, administrative support, funding, and specific LMS functions, reflection on these elements of online peer workshopping fall outside the scope of this research.

Survey Results

Survey responses analysed (Table 1) that improved my understanding of students' experiences using technologies, time management, and peer-to-peer interaction included the following results.

Table 1

Survey Questions Analysed and Results

Survey Questions	Results
Q3 – What kind of work do you think should be involved in a creative writing unit?	A combination of research and writing (43%), Regular writing exercises (43%), Workshopping and feedback (43%)
Q5 – What tools do you normally use to communicate online? Why those?	Email (81%), Social media (33%), Videoconferencing (33%), Forums, blogs, online newsletters (29%), Direct online messaging (24%), Phone messaging (19%)
Q6 – Were technologies a barrier to your participation? If yes, what were those barriers?	No (87%), Yes (13%)
Q9 – Do you think you miss out on anything on-campus students are getting?	Interactivity with students and teachers in learning contexts (43%), No (30%), A community / social interaction (17%), Meeting other First Nations students (4%), Yes, with no explanation (4%)
Q10 – Do you see peer feedback as valuable? Why/why not?	Yes (78%), Somewhat (22%)
Q12 – Did reading and giving feedback to your peers improve your own perception of the unit or your writing? If yes, how?	Yes (83%), No (9%), Somewhat (4%), No answer (4%)
Q13 – Do you think workshops should be mandatory or optional? Why?	Mandatory (69%), Optional (22%), No answer (9%)
Q14 – Do you think workshopping should be marked? And, if so, what final percentage should it be worth, and how should the marker quantify your grade?	Yes, worth 10-15% (83%), Yes, worth 20% (13%), No (4%)
Q15 – How many weeks of workshopping do you think should be included? Why that number?	2-3 weeks (78%), The full teaching period (13%), 1 week (4%), No answer (4%)
Q16 – At what point in trimester (what week) were you ready to workshop your creative work in WRIT309/509?	Around 3 weeks before submission (65%), No answer (17%), Early in the teaching period (13%), Right before submission (4%)
Q17 – Roughly how long (in hours) did you spend on workshopping in WRIT309/509?	Up to 3 hours (52%), Around 10 hours (17%), 4-6 hours (13%), Around 20 hours (13%)

Survey Questions	Results
Q18 – Should workshops be synchronous (at a designated time) or asynchronous (at times that suit you)? Why?	Asynchronous (83%), Synchronous (13%), Unsure (4%)
Q19 – Were the digital tools (posting Word documents into your group's discussion forum, etc.) easy to navigate?	Easy (83%), Difficult at first attempt (13%), Consistently difficult (4%)
Q22 – Did you find the Peer Feedback Form useful in giving and receiving feedback during the workshopping? Why/why not?	Yes (83%), Somewhat (13%), No (4%)

In the survey (Question 6), only three students out of twenty-three replied that they had technological barriers to their participation in the digital workshops (Figure 1). Two of these replies (9%) related to unstable internet connections and computer issues rather than unit design, leaving only one respondent (4%) who had difficulty using the technology required for the workshopping task. Difficulty using Microsoft Word and the LMS discussion forums is a problem for the student more broadly, as these are technologies used in all units at the institution on a weekly basis.

Figure 1

*Q6 Were Technologies a Barrier to Participation?*
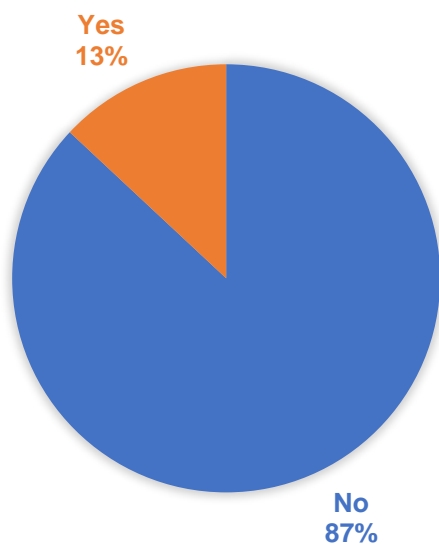
In a survey question (Q5) about what technologies students use in their everyday lives to communicate online, the results were varied. Of the other twenty-one respondents to this question, seven (33%) listed social media such as Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram. Five (24%) listed direct messaging platforms such as Facebook Messenger, WhatsApp, and Discord. Four students (19%) listed phone messaging. Six (29%) listed forums, blogs and online newsletters.

Seven (33%) listed videoconferencing via Zoom and Microsoft Teams. The most common response was email, with seventeen respondents (81%) listing it. Students consistently explained their preferences for email because of its ease, simplicity, and speed. One student wrote, "you can reply thoughtfully to others and schedules don't clash – conversations can happen over a period of time."

The students were asked to upload their drafts as Word documents to their workshopping group's forum, to download their peers' shared drafts as Word documents, and to fill out a Peer Feedback Form for each of the peers. The Peer Feedback Form was a simple Word document in which the students were requested to leave feedback on strengths and areas for improvement on each of the storytelling techniques covered in the unit. In a question (Q19) on whether participants found these digital tools "easy to navigate" (Figure 2) three students (13%) responded that they found it difficult to access their peer group's forum and/or upload their Word documents on the first attempt, and then easy on subsequent attempts. One respondent (4%) found the digital tools consistently inhibitive. Another student responded, "I would have liked to have been able to have added some comments in the Word document rather than use the scaffold [i.e. the Peer Feedback Form] only, but the scaffold was a fantastic guide."

Figure 2

Q19 Were the Digital Tools Easy to Navigate?
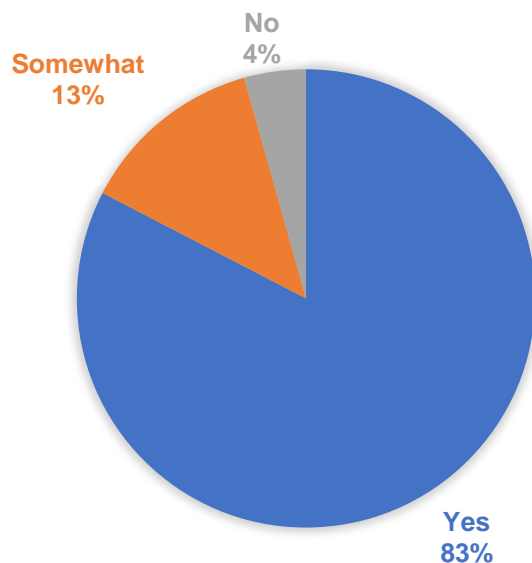
In another survey question (Q22) on whether the Peer Feedback Form was useful, 19 respondents answered yes (83%), three answered somewhat (13%), and one replied no (4%).

To discover how to reduce time constraints for online students, the survey asked questions about what tools or programs participants commonly use to communicate online (Q5), how long they spent completing peer workshopping (Q18), and about the format of the assessment (Q13, Q14). The majority of respondents professed a preference for already-known writing tools such as forums, email, and Word. One respondent wrote that via the LMS forums "you can reply

thoughtfully to others and schedules don't clash – conversations can happen over a period of time." Another student wrote that "forums are easiest and most accessible." Another student clarified that they prefer forums because "It is quick, easy, and less hassle trying to find a time that suits. Even if there is something live, it is either take a day off work, or watch after the event."

On questions about the format of the peer workshopping assessment, responses were more varied. When asked whether the workshopping should be mandatory or optional (Figure 3, Q13), five (22%) responded optional because of their other commitments, two (9%) did not respond, and the other sixteen (69%) responded mandatory because of how useful the workshops were.

Figure 3

*Q13 Should the Workshops be Mandatory or Optional?*
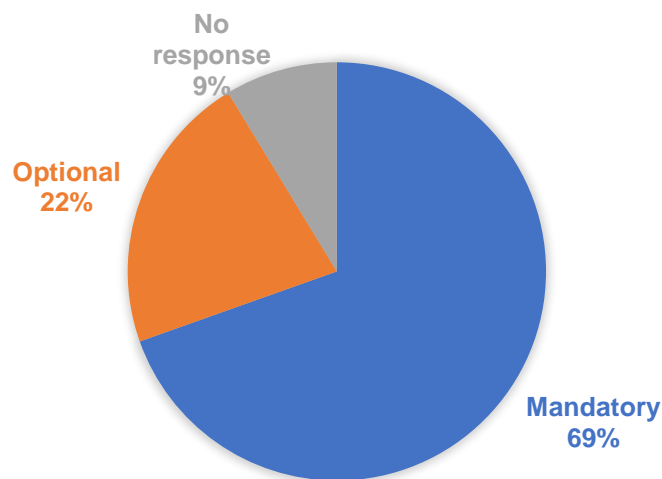
My creative non-fiction workshops took place over two weeks of the unit, which runs for twelve weeks in total. The two weeks occurred after in-depth teaching on the genres and after students received feedback from educators on their first assessment – which included a proposal for their creative non-fiction work – but a few weeks before the final assessment was due. Students were asked to submit at least 500 words of their final creative work, which was only a very small portion of the final submission but was carefully selected to match the ten percent workshopping allocation while encouraging students to begin the drafting process. The consensus in survey responses about the timing and percentage of the workshopping assessment (Q14, Q15, Q16) were that two weeks of workshopping was adequate, and that ten percent was a fair portion of their overall grade. When asked how long the online students spent on completing the task (Q17), responses ranged from two hours up to two respondents who estimated they spent twenty hours on the task. On-campus students spent one hour each week of workshopping, plus additional time in preparing their own submission for their peers. It appeared even with the reduced timeframe for workshopping, some online students were spending disproportionate amounts of time on the task, although this is difficult to quantify as students calculated different parts of the task in their responses, such as preparing their own drafts or implementing revisions.

Another relevant survey question (Q18) asked if students would prefer set times for live workshopping or asynchronous written workshopping (Figure 4). Only three students (13%) would

have preferred set times, one (4%) was unsure, but everyone else responded that they preferred asynchronous workshops. As one respondent wrote, "Online learning is about flexibility, and it needs to be reflected in this activity as well."

Figure 4

Q18 Should Workshops be Synchronous or Asynchronous?
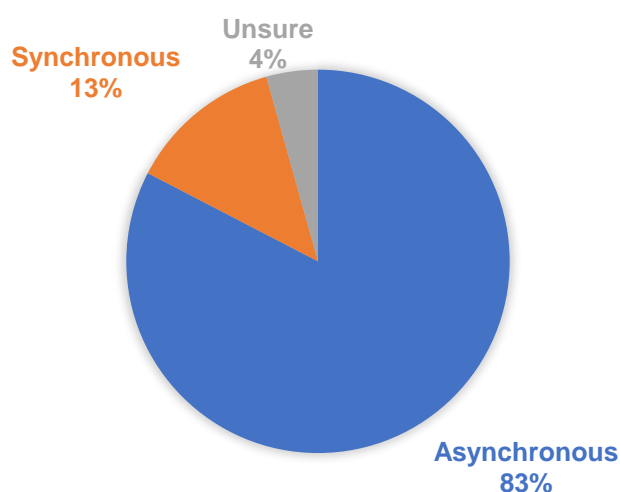
In a question (Q9) asking whether the online students felt they were "miss[ing] out on anything on-campus students are getting," respondents wrote "only social interaction"; "Interaction with fellow students"; "Immediate communication"; "Real time discussions [...and] Collaborative support in on-campus groups"; "face-to-face interaction provides communication opportunities that transcend the verbal/written form"; "meeting with other students"; and "having coffees with other students." Another student opined, "The communication that happens when a group of people are together is more wholesome than online interaction, being part of a group, making study friends."

Another finding from the survey responses was how much the students enjoyed the workshops. When students taking the survey were asked what kind of work they anticipated would be involved in a creative writing unit (Q3), ten responses (43%) explicitly mentioned workshopping or the giving/receiving of feedback on writing drafts. In a question on the value of peer feedback (Q10), no respondents answered that it was unvaluable. Responses described it as "invaluable" and "critical," and many students described the value of seeing their work through the eyes of a diverse group of readers.

In a similar finding to that of a study by Lundstrom & Baker (2009), another survey question asked if reading and giving feedback to peers improved their own writing (Q12), to which 19 responded yes (83%). One respondent explained, "Reading and providing feedback was useful to take a step back and apply the unit's lessons on structure and scene on real world examples. Seeing weaknesses in drafts is a positive, as the polished examples throughout the semester were written by seasoned writers and compositionally strong. Learning from weakness is also valuable, especially in a non-judgemental environment."

The final survey question (Q25) asked students what revisions they made to their drafts based on their peers' feedback. Answers ranged immensely, including character development, clarity, narration, dialogue, scene setting, structure, "pruning of florid descriptions", and development of descriptive elements.

Discussion

My survey of students was an attempt to gauge their anonymous reactions to specific changes I made in digital peer workshops during the COVID-19 pandemic, focusing on three areas I identified as important: reducing inequalities between students, time constraints of online group work, and the lack of social peer-to-peer interaction.

"A fantastic guide": Reducing Inequalities Between Students

My implementation of simpler technologies, using those that students were already familiar with such as the LMS forums and Word documents, was an attempt to reduce inequalities between students, particularly for those who found new technology challenging to learn. The students of the 2019 cohort used Google Docs so that they could leave comments directly on their peers' drafts and this caused much confusion and difficulty. Interestingly, research on the use of Google Docs in collaborative tertiary assessments has indicated that it does not necessarily lead to improvement of student grades, and that students have previously reported challenges (Zhou et al., 2012). The use of a simple Word document and uploading of files for the 2021 cohort was in response to feedback from the 2019 cohort on the complications using Google Docs. The Peer Feedback Form was an addition for the 2021 cohort after the 2019 group indicated problems with self-directed peer feedback. In the on-campus workshop group, an educator was physically in the room guiding the students, but due to the asynchronous nature of the online workshopping, this guidance was less "hands on" for the digital workshop groups. Instructors could remind groups to move to the next step but could not as easily control the timing and focus of participants. Participation ran more smoothly with the addition of the Peer Feedback Form.

Reflecting on the survey results from the 2021 cohort, a minority of students need closer guidance than the Peer Feedback Form allows, and some students also need closer guidance in their initial access to groups, use of LMS forums, and uploading of drafts. Therefore, future iterations of the unit will include a live, recorded session for online students that walks them through their first access to the forum. If students are asked to upload their drafts as they interact with the live session (whether at the appointed time, or via the recording), it will also give their peers longer to workshop each draft, while simultaneously reducing the load of instructors in chasing up late submissions. For students who have more inhibitive issues with the technologies used at the institution, the workshopping content will also include where to find help in using these technologies from the university's resources, with direct links.

"Online learning is about flexibility": The Time Constraints of Online Group Work

The technological expertise of the mature-age digital cohort was widely variable. Some students were familiar with more professional methods of online communication through programs such as Discord or Kami. Others were familiar with social media such as Facebook, and others with older, established forms of online communication such as email and forum posting. While the more digitally literate students occasionally commented on more advanced technologies they

would like to use in the unit, as a teacher it seemed best to simplify the technologies in order to lessen the burden on students to learn *both* the unit content and the necessary digital tools.

The results in Figure 3 showing that participants would like the peer workshopping to be mandatory were interesting, as the unit's workshopping assessment was optional. However, of the 128 students who enrolled in the unit in 2021, only nine did not complete at least part of the workshopping task. The workshopping grade was ten marks (which equated to ten percent of their entire unit grade), with 2.5 marks allocated for each completed workshopping of their three peers and 2.5 marks allocated to the sharing of their own draft. Some survey respondents commented that this was unfair, as some peers completed useful Peer Feedback Forms while other peers were very cursory. On the other hand, research has demonstrated that a large part of the value of peer workshopping is not in the receiving of peer feedback, but in the giving of it. Lundstrom & Baker (2009) completed a study in which students took part in peer workshopping in two groups, one solely giving feedback and one solely receiving feedback. The group who experienced more improvements in their writing were those who offered feedback to their peers. Further, in studies comparing written and conversational peer workshops (Comer et al., 2014; Liu and Sadler 2003), students who wrote their feedback had more time practicing and honing their writing skills. Indeed, following my own research into the value of written feedback, I have also adapted my on-campus workshops so that students write their peers' feedback on a piece of paper and hand it back, as well as having a conversation.

Research supports that the structure and design of online workshopping are important to its success. Van den Berg et al. (2006) discuss how designing the timing of peer assessment, its reciprocity, and the use of small groups are important factors. Additionally, for timing, Cowan (2012, par. 8) writes, "the peer-review workshop should succeed rather than preclude a more "hands-on" mode of teaching. It is assumed to be an advanced pedagogy for students who have progressed to a certain level of formal and contextual understanding that will allow them to contribute insightfully and constructively to the discussion of their peers' works-in-progress." It is clear from the responses in Figure 4 that asynchronous workshopping was vastly preferable to students but that this resulted in some of the cohort spending longer than necessary on the task. However, the survey did not ascertain whether the respondents voluntarily spent longer on the task. A participant in the 2019 focus group had the experience of completing both online and in-person workshops and was surprised at the difference between her/his expectations and experiences of the on-campus group. While s/he had anticipated that the on-campus workshops would be more interactive and useful, s/he found that the online workshops produced a deeper and more thoughtful level of feedback. The student pondered whether the difference had to do not just with the mode of workshop, but also the age of the students. At my institution the on-campus students tend to be school-leavers, while the online students tend to be mature-age. The participant explained:

> For myself, because I am older, I'm doing this voluntarily. It's something I want to do. And I think quite a few of the online students have set aside a certain amount of time, possibly one module per semester, and when I look at younger students—so, if I look at my daughter going through an undergraduate degree—it is very casual, and they do things very quickly. And maybe for the older students or online students, they might be wanting to get a little bit more out of it.

The interesting points in this discussion for academics facilitating online Writing Studies workshops are that the mature-age students find that the online mode of learning suits their lives and that they gain a better quality of feedback than they might receive on-campus in a set one- or two-hour tutorial time. For some of them, coming back to university to complete a degree with a major in Writing Studies means taking their time and engaging in a different style of learning that requires asynchronous feedback. For all students, while completing peer workshops online may take longer than in-person, the feedback will perhaps be more considered and analytical, which in turn helps the peer giving the feedback to learn the unit concepts more deeply and apply them to their own writing.

"More wholesome than online interaction": The Lack of Social Peer-to-Peer Interaction

Considering research published during the COVID-19 pandemic (Law et al., 2022; Meletiou-Mavrotheris et al., 2022) that discovered students felt a loss of peer interaction during universities' moves to online learning, it might seem surprising that so many of my own survey respondents articulated a preference for asynchronous, written peer workshopping. Yet, responses to other questions in the survey demonstrated that the cohort also desired more social interaction with their peers. While I cannot recall the wholesome and idyllic interaction online students imagined occurring in my on-campus workshops - and perhaps the surprise of the aforementioned online student who attended the on-campus workshops in 2019 will attest to the differences between expectations and reality - the online students' responses are overwhelming evidence of a need for more peer interaction in a social setting. On reflection, this area of the digital offering in the unit could be much improved. However, the kinds of social interactions imagined by the respondents are not those that occur in a learning setting and instructor participation could hinder open communication between students. In its next offering, the unit will pilot a weekly social hour for online students on Zoom, with clearly set expectations around the university's cyber policies.

Survey responses indicated an overwhelmingly positive reaction to the digital peer workshops. Students indicated it was useful to have feedback from a range of readers, rather than only the teacher. In this way, students are exposed to a variety of readings that encompass different cultural and experiential nuances. They also see the mistakes of their peers, which may help them turn this critical eye to their own creative work. As Cope (2016) argues, creative writing workshops with peers help burgeoning writers to critically reflect on their own understandings and assumptions. The revisions the survey participants made after peer workshops were not only lower-order concerns of grammar, but important narrative-building techniques that would have vastly improved the students' writing before the submission of their final works. The value students extracted from the workshops demonstrates that, despite some feelings of exclusion from a social on-campus experience, they did connect with a group of peers and they focused specifically on an area of shared interest.

Conclusion

The results of the case study and survey, alongside those of other scholars researching digital pedagogies following the COVID-19 pandemic, is complex and often contradictory. It is almost impossible to please every student, so a balance must be achieved in creating a learning environment that is most broadly beneficial to students' improvement and enjoyment. This balance will depend on different university cohorts, subjects, learning environments (both digital

and in-person), and the teaching style and strengths of the particular educator. The findings of the student surveys analysed in this article relate to a case study from a "digital-first" university that simultaneously teaches Writing Studies online and on-campus. The on-campus groups are small and generally school-leavers, whereas the online groups are large and mainly mature-age students with many competing commitments outside their study.

Based on the findings of the 2021 survey of students on digital Writing Studies peer workshops, I have reflected that online students are concerned that they are not benefiting from the same valuable face-to-face instruction and social interactions that on-campus students experience. The peer Writing Studies workshop cannot be exactly replicated in the asynchronous online space, but it can be adapted to suit the different needs of the online cohort. Whereas the on-campus workshopping groups spent less time in their workshops, the online groups had more flexibility in deciding how long to take, they had more practice writing, and they had a form of social interaction where they might otherwise have been learning in isolation. The peer feedback was of a deeper experiential quality and richer variety than for the on-campus workshopping group. The digital cohort benefit from asynchronous learning, flexibility, and simple technologies. In future, I will explore the addition of more non-learning digital spaces for social interactions, and options for synchronous sessions for those who can attend.

Research into peer workshopping in the digital space has shown, in the words of a student, that "learning from weakness is also valuable." These words can also be applied not only to peer workshopping but also to university teachers, after the challenges of switching to emergency remote learning during the COVID-19 pandemic. Reflecting on our own weaknesses will help us to adapt as resilient institutions.

Conflict of Interest

The author discloses that they have no actual or perceived conflicts of interest. The author discloses that they have not received any funding for this manuscript beyond resourcing for academic time at their respective university.

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Appendix 1: Survey questions

Q1 – Why did you enrol in a creative writing unit?

Q2 – What did you want to get out of the unit?

Q3 – What kind of work do you think should be involved in a creative writing unit?

Q4 – How can our Writing department help you meet your aims and expectations?

Q5 – What tools do you normally use to communicate online? Why those?

Q6 – Were technologies a barrier to your participation? If yes, what were those barriers?

Q7 – What could lecturers do to communicate more effectively to online students, and overcome any barriers?

Q8 – If you participated in on-campus workshops: Do you think the quality of feedback in an online workshop is different to an in-person workshop? If yes, what specifically do you find different?

Q9 – Do you think you miss out on anything on-campus students are getting?

Q10 – Do you see peer feedback as valuable? Why/why not?

Q11 – Did that perception change during WRIT309/509?

Q12 – Did reading and giving feedback to your peers improve your own perception of the unit or your writing? If yes, how?

Q13 – Do you think workshops should be mandatory or optional? Why?

Q14 – Do you think workshopping should be marked? And, if so, what final percentage should it be worth, and how should the marker quantify your grade?

Q15 – How many weeks of workshopping do you think should be included? Why that number?

Q16 – At what point in trimester (what week) were you ready to workshop your creative work in WRIT309/509?

Q17 – Roughly how long (in hours) did you spend on workshopping in WRIT309/509?

Q18 – Should workshops be synchronous (at a designated time) or asynchronous (at times that suit you)? Why?

Q19 – Were the digital tools (posting Word documents into your group's discussion forum, etc.) easy to navigate?

Q20 – Are there other digital tools you would like to use when completing online workshops?

Q21 – Did the teaching materials (the Workshopping study guide and the lectures) prepare you for workshopping in WRIT309/509? If not, how could these be improved?

Q22 – Did you find the Peer Feedback Form useful in giving and receiving feedback during the workshopping? Why/why not?

Q23 – Did you find workshopping personal stories in WRIT309/509 challenging? Why/why not?

Q24 – Was it hard to receive feedback and grades based on your personal creative non-fiction stories? Why/why not?

Q25 – What revisions did you make to your creative work based on peer feedback? Did you have enough time to make these changes?