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Graham Mort

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The Reflexive Muse

Online Creative Writing Development in Africa and the UK Academy

Graham Mort, Lancaster University, United Kingdom

Abstract: In this article I will discuss a major literature development project in Africa mediated through e-learning systems, delineating working practises in Creative Writing education developed in open learning environments and their integration into an academic environment at Lancaster University. I will trace the evolution of 'distance' learning into the concept of 'online' or 'e-learning' and define those changes in terms of new environments and opportunities for learning. The article will discuss the Crossing Borders African writing project, the use of virtual space in e-learning, the aesthetics of pedagogic systems in relation to Creative Writing, the value of cultural exchange inherent in an international programme, the concept of 'action research' applied to creative and educational process and the way that reflexive practice itself creates harmonising nodes on a 'semiotic web'.

Keywords: African Writing, Creative Writing, Distance Learning, E-Learning, Online Mentoring, Cultural Exchange, Literature Development, Action Research, Practice as Research

IN THIS ARTICLE I will delineate working practises in Creative Writing education developed in open learning environments and their integration into an academic environment at Lancaster University¹. I also want to trace the development in my own thinking as 'distance' learning has evolved into the concept of 'online' or 'e-learning' and to define those changes in terms of new environments and opportunities for learning. The article will discuss the aesthetics of pedagogic systems in relation to Creative Writing, the value of cultural exchange inherent in an international programme, the concept of 'action research' applied to creative and educational process and the way that reflexive practice itself creates harmonising nodes on a 'semiotic web'.

Antecedents

For the past fifteen years I have been active in the development and commissioning of a range of Creative Writing courses that were mediated through 'distance', 'online', or 'e-learning'. My work began at the Open College of the Arts (OCA) in 1989 – an open learning institution dedicated to the Arts and founded by Lord Michael Young who also founded its sister institutions, the Open University and the National Extension College. At that time, we envisaged a learning network for the Arts that would use face-to-face tutorial meetings and also offer courses

through distance learning. Distance learning, in turn, would be supported by written guidance from specially commissioned course books. The distance learning tutorials themselves utilised hard-copy exchange through the postal system, since email was in its infancy and few prospective students possessed home computers.

It quickly became apparent that the logistics of providing face-to-face education throughout the UK were cumbersome and that our courses would be subject to competition (often for the same physical space) from local authority Further Education classes, Workers Educational Association courses and provision by other organisations that lay outside the formal educational sector. Not only did distance learning bypass such spatial and temporal constraints - getting a group of people to be in the same place at the same time - but it quickly came to define our natural constituency of students. As an open learning institution we were able to reach not only those without formal educational qualifications, but also those who might suffer from a disability, be geographically isolated, or inhabit domestic circumstances that precluded attendance at a University or Art College.

A suite of courses in Creative Writing was rapidly developed. These ranged from a generic 'experiential' foundation course (Level 1), to more specialised courses in poetry, fiction and writing for children (Level 2), to 'advanced courses' (Level 3) that pro-

¹ At the time of writing the Creative Writing Programme at Lancaster forms part of the English Department and has 4.5 members of staff who are specialists in poetry, fiction, radio writing and film scripts. We have around 150 undergraduates studying Creative Writing as part of their joint degree or as a minor option. Our postgraduate community consists of 20 part-time distance learning MA students, 14 full-time campus MA students and 12 doctoral students.



moted more autonomous study, being student-centred rather than based on writing exercises and course books. Those courses were later accredited at degree level by Glamorgan University and could earn students points on the UK Credit Accumulation and Transfer Scheme (CATS), through which a degree could be built from an aggregate of approved modules of study.

During the 10-year period of my work for the college I also managed distance learning in photography and eventually directed the entire Arts curriculum as it became increasingly focused on distance learning rather than face-to-face tutorial groups. From this experience it became obvious to me that distance learning in Creative Writing had a special efficacy, efficiency and integration. I began my doctoral study² at the University of Glamorgan in 1999 to examine this effect and to explore the relationship of my own writing in poetry, radio drama and fiction to my work in Creative Writing education. It's worth noting that the period in which I worked for OCA saw a very significant transition from hard-copy tutorial exchange to electronic exchange via email and attached files.

By 2001 I was finishing my doctorate, but had also returned to working as a freelance writer and tutor in a range of educational settings, often interdisciplinary. In that year I was asked by the British Council to take up an exploratory residency in Uganda, working at Makerere University and in a range of schools and making contact with writers and writers' groups in Kampala. During the course of my visit it became clear that young writers in Uganda suffered from a lack of educational opportunity, a depleted literature infrastructure and severely constrained or non-existent publishing opportunities. Accordingly, those writers were almost overwhelmingly keen to take advantage of any developmental opportunity that presented itself. By the end of my 6-week stay I had begun to plan a pilot distance learning scheme that would link these writers to experienced mentors in the UK, offering them expert guidance through online tutorials and using the British Council library computer suite as our electronic post box.

A pilot scheme funded by the British Council in Kampala was launched and worked very successfully: four mentors - including myself - working with 12 African participants, all writing in English. Our tutors were drawn from a broad range of cultural and intercultural backgrounds and from the outset we were keen to avoid any construction that our activity

was condescendingly postcolonial, simply because its authority emanated from the old colonial centre³. As mentors, we realised, that Africa presented a steep learning curve for us. As in all sound educational methodology, we set out with the expectation that we would learn from our students in order to teach; that what we 'knew' was contingent upon the circumstances in which we taught; that the social and cultural definition of the constituency of students we were making contact with would also define us in their eyes.

In October 2002 I took up a post as Creative Writing lecturer at Lancaster University and took charge of a distance learning MA on which I'd acted as a consultant during its design phase in the mid-1990's. The British Council was now keen to expand Crossing Borders across Africa and that meant engaging a much larger group of mentors and managing activity across 8 countries – an impossible solo operation. Not only would the University provide a broader logistical platform for this in the form of office space, payroll systems, computer terminals and other resources, it would allow a synthesis between academic⁴ Creative Writing courses and their methodology and the delivery of non-academic mentoring through Crossing Borders.

The Lancaster University Distance Learning MA

During my first two years at Lancaster the existing distance learning MA was reformed to streamline its management, to support tutors through in-service training, and to introduce a reflective commentary⁵ into tutorial practice. One significant difference between this academic programme and Crossing Borders was the use of a termly online 'conference' in which students came together in a virtual forum lasting 10 days to post and critique work, with a tutor working as a group moderator. The MA examination portfolio contains a self-reflective critical essay of 3,000 words, so conferences and reflective commentaries helped to train students as critics, effectively taking on the role that their tutors usually assumed and contributing to this final study - which could reference the work of their peers as well as wider literatures.

A further significant reform was brought about by the sheer difficulty of already overloaded campus-based tutors taking on the demands of distance learning tuition. In order to relieve this pressure we took the tuition of the DLMA 'offshore', hiring

² 'Messages in Bottles', University of Glamorgan, 2001

³ See papers exploring these issues and the use of English at: <http://www.crossingborders-africanwriting.org/about/projectarticles/>

⁴ I define 'academic' here simply in terms of outcomes and not in any sense of formative rigour as applied to creative work. The structure of creative output was very similar across academic and non-academic processes, but Crossing Borders portfolios and the 'certificate of completion' we awarded remained as evidence of participation rather than achievement against academic benchmarks and criteria.

⁵ See under Methodology: 'assignment commentary'

professional writers (all worked on *Crossing Borders* and were familiar with the methodology) who were also experienced educators. This effectively created a 'virtual department' in parallel with the actual department of 3.5 campus-based staff. It doubled our representation, allowing us to provide expertise in a wider range of literary forms in a more flexible way and to broaden our appeal to prospective students.

Methodology

In the early days at OCA, there is no doubt that the idea of distance learning was regarded as a second best option, especially in Creative Writing where we had the added and rather dubious association with a number of aggressively marketed 'correspondence courses' in writing and journalism. These often promised far more than they could realistically deliver and, in some cases, their financial return depended on high student dropout rates⁶. We certainly envisaged our tutorial methodology as being a bit like face-to-face tuition, but without the student present. So there would be a course-book, writing exercises, textual annotation and written critique of the student's work. There is an undeniable romance to the unsanitised nature of the postal system. A student's poems might arrive scented faintly with cigars or *eau de cologne*, the paper itself a clue to their predilections and pretensions - as were the reports returned by tutors. But the exchange method was also undeniably cumbersome as the UK postal system entered a corporate decline from which it has never recovered. Not only was it slow, but mail also disappeared (or was alleged to) and the agency of the Post Office became a layer of uncertainty, a hazardous no-man's-land between the tutors and their students.

By the late 1990's, most tutors and students possessed home computers and cumbersome word-processing packages were giving way to much more intuitively configured systems. Then email became a reality and redefined the paperless or 'virtual' way in which tutors received and responded to work. The new system of exchange itself did not significantly alter the tutor/student relationship, which was already virtual - in the sense that all reading and writing takes place through a process of imaginative encryption and decryption - but it dramatised the process in a stimulating way. Exchange was now almost instantaneous, diminishing not only temporal intervals, but apparently dissolving space. An email from a colleague in Harare or Kampala arrives in my inbox as

rapidly as one from my colleague in the neighbouring office. Near 'live' conversation was possible and the learning process became fully virtual in the sense that all physical vestiges of student and tutor were removed. Exchange became quicker, more dependable, easier to store, date-stamp and record - all logistical benefits, but there were other more subtle changes, too. Our projection of self became more uniform in one sense, but perhaps that offered us liberty to project a persona devoid of physically evidenced personality traits - to become a 'character' in the narrative of educational exchange. This is nothing new - being closely akin to the performative persona of the tutor in the lecture theatre or seminar room - but in distance learning it also relates closely to the interchangeable roles of reader and writer that the student/tutor relationship demands. In a sense, the tutor and student 'write' and 'read' themselves and each other through their textual relationship. So the 'rhetorical' strategies of literary texts⁷ are deployed into the educational exchange. In some institutions that sense of liberty has led to explorations of hypertext and the use of avatars to project the personal into the performative and symbolic. At Lancaster, our apprehensions about the lack of IT infrastructure in Africa constrained the use of such cutting-edge virtuality. This, and the highly motivated nature of both African participants and of our MA students, led to an emphasis on formative process rather than imaginative stimulus to produce. Accordingly, our use of IT has so far remained firmly grounded as a textual exchange mechanism.

By 2003 the *Crossing Borders* project and the Lancaster MA had been developed to share almost exactly the same methodology and a number of *Crossing Borders* mentors were acting as tutors on the DLMA. The focus on formative critiquing of extant work allowed us to define online learning as 'student-centred' - focused on textual production in a way that made the student's work our chief - though not only⁸ - resource and reference point. The principles and methods underlying this work can be defined as follows:

- Students are self-motivated and committed to their creative project - this quality is realised through the 'gateways' into study that involve the submission of CV's, project outlines and samples of work-in-progress.
- Every aspect of virtual exchange is 'writerly' so that writing skills are deployed in a range of ways

⁶ Full fees were paid upfront and then students had to work their way through a long list of solo assignments. We picked up many casualties of those courses.

⁷ See Booth, Wayne C, 'The Rhetoric of Fiction', University of Chicago Press, 1983, for an in-depth study of these roles in literary texts

⁸ Tutors and mentors all have their own favourite critical or textual resources and these are part of the frame of reference in tutorial change. This is made unique by its focus on the student's work and by the individual viewpoint exerted by a tutor-practitioner actively pursuing their own writing. Concerns a tutor has about their own work can often find a focus in a student's work and the resolution of those issues has a mutuality and urgency often absent from the dutifully delivered curriculum.

from explication and composition to intervention and analysis.

- The problems that each new creative work invents are, in a sense, unique to that work and can be solved more successfully by an involved creative process than by abstract principles.
- In electronic exchange the work of students remains ductile and the tutor can intervene in a 'hands-on' way, re-drafting passages as exemplars, inserting comments and 'track changes' into the text to make it a demonstrative platform for learning and realisation.
- The creative work of students is accompanied by a reflective commentary (the 'assignment commentary') expressing creative intention and exploring its difficulties and perceived achievements.
- The tutor submits a structured written report that responds to the assignment commentary, developing an argument in relation to the student's work in order to move it forward.
- All exchanges are a matter of written (electronic) record and can be retrieved at any time, giving the process stability, longevity and resonance over time. At the end of a course the student has their portfolio and its educative dialogue as a long-term resource.
- The process forms an original piece of collaborative research developed through electronic dialectic.
- This research might be defined as 'research through practice' in which creative process itself is seen as forward reaching in the making of a new textual artefact and new knowledge through its unique configuration.
- The process is also akin to 'action research' in which a strongly reflexive element is built into a logistical process in order to develop and re-define it as it unfurls through time.
- The reflexive nature of project design (see below) and the educative exchange it enables form a resonant paradigm where an educational strategy, its outputs, and the logistical matrix in which it is embedded harmonise as parallel or even allegorical processes.

That 'allegorical' nature gives project design and educational development an aesthetic quality, so that issues of administration and delivery become an essentially creative process evolving towards ideal form. If we see a text as efficient or elegant in its delivery of imaginative impulse, then we can see a system as gaining elegance and efficiency through

its organisational aesthetic. Just as a reader creates a unique imaginative experience from the shared semiotics of typography, so a tutor and student define and extend an educative process through the constraints and liberty and the acts of meaning and significance it confers upon them. Educational process and form become allegories of literary process and form: harmonic nodes on a semiotic web⁹.

Action Research

There is insufficient space in such a short article to explore different conceptions of 'action research' or 'participatory action research' as it might properly be applied to our work here. But it would be useful to rehearse some of its key characteristics: that it is usually applied to ongoing systems (especially educational ones), that it privileges empirical enquiry over hypothesis¹⁰, that it is validated by activity and production, that it is incremental and integral to activity and production through its reflexive processes, that it is both the consequence of and stimulus for creative process.

As I've suggested above, the design of the Crossing Borders and the DLMA were harmonised wherever possible. This sharing of personnel across the programmes allowed for the consolidation and crossover of expertise. At the level of project design, reflexivity was built into the project via a close working relationship with tutors (MA) and mentors (Crossing Borders). That process involved consultation through planning documents, annual written feedback from students, mentors and participants, and the regular monitoring of tutorial reports. Initially a 'quality control' exercise, monitoring led to the accumulation of excellent and diverse examples of tutorial support that could be disseminated to new and existing tutors, widening and deepening our practice. It formed a strong example of reflexivity and one where an initial perception of 'policing' gave way to a much more celebratory sense of participation. Face-to-face training events for mentors were also held to share and define our experiences.

'Open questionnaire'¹¹ feedback from the DLMA students and from African participants at the end of their experience was analysed in a way that tried to separate personal or local difficulty from wider issues that might indicate structural or institutional defects that could be addressed. In the case of Crossing Borders each British Council office involved also supplied detailed feedback about their experience of managing the programme.

⁹ See below under Action Research

¹⁰ Though I would argue that hypothesis is simply transferred from over-arching 'what if?' to more localised and contingent questions that are embedded in an ongoing process.

¹¹ A mixture of structured (and inevitably 'leading') questions, plus open space for personal response

My early experience of distance learning – and perhaps a part of its received wisdom – was that student dropout levels were inevitably quite high. The more cumbersome the system, the more likely students were to experience difficulty. The most destructive trait proved to be when tutors were late in supplying their responses. Enquiry into such cases revealed that students invariably translated that lateness into a lack of interest in their work and a lack of self-worth. As a result, relationships could quickly deteriorate into a sense of let-down and betrayal. Once those characteristic feelings were communicated to tutors and mentors, their sensitivity to their student writers was enhanced. Due to this feedback loop, and since most of them were freelance writers, our tutors proved adept at managing tutorial commitments, just as they managed a range of other writing and educational work. Accordingly, the dropout rate on the MA is almost non-existent and the dropout on Crossing Borders was remarkably low considering the difficulty some participants experienced in accessing the Internet – a mere handful each year failed to complete their assignments.

In action research based education and in distance learning in particular, communication is oxygen. The tightly reflexive nature of project structures, the questioning and investigative stance of our educational activity,¹² imbued the whole process with a sense of curiosity. That curiosity proved to be active on both sides of the educational and mentoring relationship, not only on Crossing Borders, but increasingly on campus-based programmes where overseas students began to apply in increasing numbers, having seen links to the African work. It became clear that another aspect of reflexivity was that the constitution of the student body at Lancaster might come to reflect our wider research activities, rather than respond to a more narrow curriculum, as taught and examined. We also became sensitised to the value of ‘writing across cultures’ because of the way our radically different personal, political and cultural histories, our assumptions and perspectives, were exposed, challenged, melted down and re-cast under a mutually interrogative gaze.

Exploring Reflective Space

I have already implied that the structure of the creative writing programme at postgraduate level – both MA and PhD – is itself a model of action research, where the writing moves forward into new construc-

tions that test language, structure and form, whilst being accompanied by reflective discourse.

In the case of Crossing Borders, the assignment commentary became more than just an opportunity to address the writer’s self-identified intentions¹³; it became a zone in which cultural and linguistic issues could be explored and negotiated. If words from vernacular language were used within an English text, or if peculiarly African or English customs or language usage were at issue, then this accompanying reflective writing became the space in which both mentors and participants explored meaning and significance. Our rather ill defined ideal of ‘cultural exchange’ became a reality through praxis – through the exigencies of written communication, the forward reaching nature of textual production that was so closely worked by both mentor and participant. Cultural assumptions were challenged and ideas about the ‘other’ redefined on both sides of the process of exchange.

Each year, writers on the Crossing Borders programme visited participating countries to run live workshops and to organise celebratory readings of new work. Writers’ visits also proved to have a strongly reflexive quality as ideas that the writers had developed through their work in virtual space went through a ‘reality check’ in real space and time. In fact, for most writers visiting the continent, the experience was a visceral one. A number of Ugandan writers also visited the UK on residencies at the University (Jackee Batanda) or through residencies that we had brokered.¹⁴ So we might argue that the relationship between virtual communication and communication that takes place with the physical presence of participants was also a reflexive one. The presence of Ugandan writer Jackee Batanda in seminars held on the African Writing course at Lancaster profoundly altered a textually-based virtual experience through the presence of a living African writer – and not without inhibition as the course tutor had to test her own theorised teaching against an ‘authentic’ and grounded source of knowledge. Our sense of ‘reality’ in such tutorial relationships is derived from elements of the virtual and the actual, so that expectations developed in either domain are continually modified. This idea of modulation between virtual and actual forms of contact forms the basis of the ‘hybrid’ research environments being developed at Lancaster for MA and PhD students.

¹² See below for a brief account of how the Beyond Borders festival led to the compilation of structured feedback from both professional and public consultations

¹³ Of course, the debate about writers and intentionality opens up a useful dynamic in creative process where intention is matched to reader-response

¹⁴ Julius Ocwinyo, Goretti Kyumuhendo, Ayeta Wangusa

Expanding the Programmes

In 2003 the British Council made a serious investment in Crossing Borders, expanding the scheme from its original focus on Uganda to include Nigeria, Ghana, Cameroon, South Africa, Zimbabwe, Kenya and Malawi. We employed a project manager to handle the increasingly complex logistics and a mentor coordinator who recruited, trained and managed our network of 25 mentors. Each year a writer visited each of the 8 countries to run live workshops, so cultural exchange was experienced through actual as well as literary journeys. A total of around 300 African writers were mentored on this scheme. Meanwhile, Canadian writer, Aisling Hunter, took up a residency at Lancaster,¹⁵ to be followed by Ugandan writer, Jackee Batanda, making our international dimension a reality for students on the campus.

In the same year we established the Crossing Borders website¹⁶ - our 'cultural crossroads on the information super-highway'. Though the programme has worked primarily through student-centred techniques, we also used the Macmillan Writers Coursebook and Writing Poems¹⁷ to provide background material. The website and its dedicated facilities freed us from such dependency and we were able to develop a unique resource of 'Writers on Writing' on that site, featuring new creative work and essays on working practice. Our intention was to move away from a sense of orthodoxy - and even hegemony - commissioning work from contemporary UK writers and African writers from the diaspora to create a sense of breadth and openness. The site also profiled all participants and mentors in a given year. It featured articles written about the project, so that participants and mentors had access to more structured academic thinking about the process in which they were involved. We added discussion threads and also a management facility intended to allow us to communicate as project designers and developers. In short, the website itself added considerably to the reflexive nature of our activities both intellectually and pragmatically.

During this same period we were also developing a new website¹⁸ for Creative Writing at Lancaster. This carried the standard information about courses and staff, but it also had a student-centred approach, featuring profiles of students and accounts of their experience on our courses. The result was a 'true-life' profile of the frustrations and gratifications of embarking on a Creative Writing MA and the kind

of encomiums we could never have written ourselves without blushing. We added photo-galleries and links to Crossing Borders, so that both campus-based students and those on the DLMA could understand that we were linked to a growing constituency of writers across Africa.

The re-vitalisation of Creative Writing at Lancaster, after several years of under-investment, also brought with it an increasing number of applications to study Creative Writing at PhD level. A growing number of applications for both models of the MA and for the PhD came from overseas or from diasporic communities within the UK. Through the projection of our activities in Africa, it seemed that we were projecting a sense of cultural diversity - excitement about how writing in English was generated and interpreted across cultures.

In 2004/5 the British Council was undergoing a major reform of its international programmes and it was clear that Crossing Borders would have a limited life, despite attracting many more applications from African Writers than we could possibly engage with. The project was scheduled to close down in March 2006, but we continued to develop, adding a magazine of new writing to the website and staging Beyond Borders¹⁹ - the biggest festival of African writing since the early 1960's - which attracted delegates from 17 Anglophone African countries and the UK. True to the ideals of action research and its reflexive strategies, we built a series of public debates into the festival, each structured around key research questions and each assigned a rapporteur to record discussion. Feedback from the festival was later compiled into an extensive report, which we designed as a means of influencing literature development policy in Africa for the future, but drawn from what African writers themselves were saying. The main developmental needs were perceived to be literature development training, the use of indigenous writing in schools, the development of literature in indigenous languages, and the development of a much stronger publishing infrastructure.

New Developments

By 2005 it was clear that the environment at Lancaster was developing rapidly and that my own work was harmonising with other research into regions, regionality and literatures of diaspora and migration. I became a co-applicant on the Moving Manchester: Mediating Marginalities²⁰ project and we were successful in obtaining an AHRC award of £365,000

¹⁵ Funded by the Canadian High Commission and stimulated by Crossing Borders

¹⁶ www.crossingborder-africanwriting.org (the website has received 453,555 hits in the first 8 months of 2006 alone)

¹⁷ Sansom, P, Bloodaxe Poetry Handbooks, 1994.

¹⁸ <http://www.lancs.ac.uk/depts/english/crew/>

¹⁹ Held in Kampala, October 2006: <http://www.britishcouncil.org/mozambique-whats-on-beyond-borders.htm>

²⁰ <http://www.lancs.ac.uk/fass/projects/movingmanchester/>

from the Arts and Humanities Research Council to research the literature produced by migrant communities in Manchester since 1960. The project research team brought together literary and cultural theorists as well as Creative Writing practitioners and project designers.²¹ A full-length academic study as well as an anthology of new creative writing will result, forming contrapuntal research outcomes. Creative Writing at Lancaster had been returned to its original institutional niche in the English Department in 2002 and our new project seemed to symbolise the disciplinary reconciliation that this (largely managerial) decision implied.

The relocation of Creative Writing into English suggests a synthesis of literary theory and practice. From my own perspective, and apart from an African Literature module at undergraduate level, there was little Black British or Asian literature on the syllabus, despite a growing emphasis on a 'multicultural' literature in the UK. That situation is now slowly changing and it is likely that some of the key texts from the Moving Manchester project will form the basis of a new Contemporary Literature MA module, so that academic and action research is feeding curriculum development.

In 2005 we launched Trans-Scriptions - a seminar series open to both academics and the public²². We invited academics and creative writing practitioners from the UK and the diaspora to be our guest speakers and placed our emphasis on a synthesis of retrospection (postcolonial literature) and anticipation (the newly emergent writing from black British and Asian writers in the UK). That series of seminars will continue into 2007.

Future Pathways

In his book *Consilience*²³, Edward O. Wilson describes an ant colony as a 'semiotic web'. Apart from the obvious links with the 'world wide web' of the Internet, the concept seems relevant in understanding the current situation at Lancaster University where a relatively new academic discipline - Creative Writing - finds itself in possession of a flexible and far-reaching pedagogic methodology, a community of writers linked via the Internet in Africa, research activity on migration and diaspora in the UK, and a growing community of MA and PhD students from significantly diverse cultural and intercultural backgrounds.

At the time of writing, we're working to develop a new mentoring project in Africa. Radiophonics will train young Ugandan writers (using live work-

shops and e-learning) to produce short dramatised fiction for radio focused on topical issues. We will record the broadcast plus live audience reaction enabled by phone-in responses. The entire programme will then be mounted as a podcast on the Crossing Borders site, which is being redefined as the rubric under which a range of new African writing activity will be accommodated.

Crossing Borders magazine is being re-designed to allow for much easier lateral trafficking (links to pages instead of scrolling), easy access to back issues and an instantly downloadable and printable version of the publication. We will revitalise its constituency of contributors by launching a new online writers workshop. This is being piloted by my colleague, Dr. Kate Horsley, and will be situated on the British Council site where African writers will have the opportunity to share work in a non-academic setting alongside our PhD and MA students. We will also develop training in online workshop moderation, so that professional skills can be developed. The online workshops will closely resemble the online MA conferences, but will eventually offer a wider range of genre-specific events, including poetry, short fiction, the novel, radio writing, writing for young people, writing for children, science fiction - and others. All participating writers will be profiled on the site and we anticipate that intercultural dialogue will be a strong feature of such exchange. We will also provide access to chat rooms and discussion threads where wider discourse can be developed.

Just as Crossing Borders will widen its remit to accommodate a range of new projects funded by the British Council, so the concept of Trans-Scriptions at Lancaster University has been developed into a web platform²⁴ focusing the nexus of writing, culture and location from which it is possible to access a range of related activities at Lancaster - Narrating the North, Crossing Borders, Sing Like a River, Moving Manchester, Radiophonics. It's likely that the Crossing Borders website will be eventually relocate to Lancaster, with its international online writing workshops and magazine, so that we will have created a series of 'space platforms' of linked modularity - a virtual centre for international writing and research.

The campus MA has recently benefited from the development of a virtual learning environment where students can post work for seminars, meet in a virtual café, make announcements, view tuition schedules, consult the Postgraduate Handbook, read and write book reviews, view exemplar material from past MA portfolios and take part in termly online conferences

²¹ Professor Lynne Pearce, Dr. Robert Crawshaw, Dr. Corinne Fowler and myself

²² <http://www.lancs.ac.uk/depts/english/crew/Retrospection.html>

²³ Wilson, Edward O, 'Consilience', Little Brown and Company, 1998

²⁴ <http://www.lancs.ac.uk/depts/english/crew/Trans-Scriptions.html>

modelled on the DLMA. Ironically, the 'second-best option' of distance learning has conveyed powerful pedagogic advantages – from the logistics of course delivery to the intricacies of textual analysis and drafting. Virtuality has strengthened the efficiency of the course and also our sense of contact and continuity. The hybrid virtual/actual learning environment is now a reality and one which we plan to pursue vigorously with the aid of a grant from the English Subject Centre²⁵ that has enabled my colleague Dr. Lee Horsley to become a Departmental e-learning advocate. The distance learning MA website has also taken on some of the new features of the campus MA site and the two are now developing in parallel and influencing each other in a reflexive relationship. The hybridity of such environments is making the term 'distance learning' obsolete and, in future, we will redefine and project our programmes as ones of 'e-learning with online resources'.

Our PhD community is rapidly growing and now includes students from Pakistani, Indian, Caribbean, African, and 'indigenous' British (to deploy that increasingly relativistic term) origins. It's a scattered community in geographical terms and we have already deployed a hybrid approach to supervision using face-to-face and e-learning methods. Those improvised means of supervision are now giving way to a much more considered and programmatic approach through which we will address the issue of what should constitute research training for Creat-

ive Writing PhD students. We have a prototypical website that we will re-design in the coming year. That features a café, work in progress areas, tutorial 'drop zones', and a learning log that is a date-stamped to provide an unalterable record of supervision. We will develop the site to house all student records – key dates, annual reviews, upgrade panels and reports – so that the director of postgraduate studies and supervisors can understand a student's progress at a glance through secure areas of the site. The site itself will constitute a 'research environment' as well as enabling practical aspects of supervision. We will hold regular work in progress workshops, advertise Faculty research training events, store exemplar material such as the reflective/critical theses from successful doctoral candidates, continue to discuss the evolving nature of the Creative Writing PhD and develop a series of links to Lancaster's internal resources, to the Tran-Scriptures and Crossing Borders sites, as well as to sites of relevance to the students' creative and more theoretical research.

Above all, we will provide a research and learning environment in which our writing is tested against fluid and dynamically changing cultural values; where the dependency of reception within the academy's own normative culture is de-stabilised; where new writing is invigorated by the presence, participation and feedback of writers from across the globe.

About the Author

Dr Graham Mort

Graham Mort is a university lecturer and a published poet who has produced six full-length collections of work; he also writes short fiction and radio drama. He is currently director of postgraduate studies in Creative Writing at Lancaster University and is a distance learning specialist. He designed and ran the British Council 'Crossing Borders' mentoring scheme for African writers (2001-2006), which engaged writers from the UK with writers from 8 countries across sub-Saharan Africa. He was the UK adviser and designer for the 'Beyond Borders' literature festival, held in Kampala in October 2005, which attracted writers and delegates from 17 Anglophone African countries across the continent. Graham was a co-applicant on a major AHRC-funded research project, 'Moving Manchester: Mediating Marginalities' which has recently been commissioned to catalogue and research the writings of migrant and diasporic communities in Greater Manchester since 1960. Graham's most recent collection of poems is, 'A Night on the Lash', (Seren, 2004).

²⁵ <http://www.english.heacademy.ac.uk/explore/projects/archive/technology/tech22.php>

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