

Camberwell College of Arts: The Writers' Collective and Writing Advocates

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Purpose

This initiative was a response to the challenge identified by a Course Student Survey (CSS) survey that raised concerns around student 'voice': 68.3% was the average satisfaction rate for voice for students at Camberwell Chelsea and Wimbledon Colleges (CCW) at the time of starting this project (2021/22). We created this group in the belief that creative writing gives students an opportunity to express their voice and achieve belonging. It was also created to tackle the fact that creative writing is put to one side by many students when working on University of the Arts London (UAL) art/design briefs. We also wanted to explore whether creating a space and community where students can express and explore freely their identify and voice would increase engagement.

Long term, we hoped to establish a culture of connecting through writing in courses where writing isn't prioritised in some curricula.

"By the time it had got to 3rd year, I felt like I hadn't, apart from my dissertation, which is probably what I was focusing on in the first half of the year, I hadn't done any other kinds of writing. And I always loved sort of poetry and I'd done that kind of since I was a kid."

Student Writing Advocate

Description

We applied and gained £7,000 over two years from UAL Camberwell Chelsea and Wimbledon (CCW) Teaching & Learning fund. Students came from an Open Call to all students at CCW. Two staff initiated and led all work and curriculum design, all other decisions were made in collaboration with the students.

Activities included:

Specialist writing workshops. Weekly meetings and workshops onsite at Chelsea College of Arts dedicated to writing, speakers and devising & planning end of project outcomes. We brought in external speakers: writers. Zine creatives, Library special collections, climate activists. We ran writing & reading sessions with peer discussions and feedback. We had pop-up themed exhibitions using keywords like 'belonging' as starting point. All outcomes were democratically planned and developed collaboratively with the group.

Communication. Weekly emails to students alongside collaborative use of Padlet walls to document/track activities, shared broader writing resources and instigated a Writers' Room Padlet to enable students to share, connect and feedback outside sessions.

Exhibitions. A range of exhibitions in a variety of spaces combining writing and their creative practice and response to specialist research.

End of Project Outcomes:

Publication: Force Majeure. Two editions of 200-page full colour publication featuring writing and images from all 26 students. They received 5 copies each.

Events. Two one-hour reading events in the Red Room Chelsea where students read to a full room of invited guests.

Exhibitions. All 26 students exhibited visual and written work using range of strategies such as installation, projection and performance. These exhibitions had private views with range of guests; UAL staff, family and friends.

CCW Writing Advocates. We established a group of 9 Writing advocates. The role of the Advocates is to generate interest and show the powers of writing in creatives practice. Students came from BA Fine Art, MA Fine Art, BA Graphic Design Communication, MA Illustration, BA Illustration courses with varied experience and confidence with writing. Students supported creative writing workshops/activities to enable self-expression, voice, belonging and expanded writing practice for curriculum. This is an initiative that is still in progress.

All Write! Prompt deck. A deck of 80 starter prompts devised by Writing Advocates under 4 themes related to writing for creative education; Personalising + Positioning, Reflect + Renew, Exploring + Expanding and Disconnecting + Fun! Language was graded by the tutors after feedback and testing to ensure accessibility. Collated in box. The aim is to facilitate the introduction of creative writing workshops to help with developing and expanding projects from the curriculum.

Outcomes of activity

What Changed and who benefited?

- All students that engaged with the projects all grew in confidence and developed their voice.

"In the beginning I was very introvert person. So Caroline, suggest me to enjoy the writing collective. She says there are people. There were warm, very welcome and encouraged me to share more my opinion there."

Student Writing Advocate

- Students all cited the positive impact on their creative practice both in terms of writing and practical work: students specified they used writing as a tool to develop creative practice as well as becoming a feature of their final outcomes (curriculum).
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“Writing is quite important for my practice because I’m studying graphic design and the publication is also one of my practice. So when I first time and talk to Caroline about something like my, the reflective writing, that is also an important part for our graphic design.”

Student Writing Advocate

- Sense of community and connecting with others outside of course as key value of collective.

“They didn't feel like there was any judgement and like even coming into it quite late and I would come in like initially I think the very first session I came into, I was incredibly anxious but then like after that first session, I already felt like comfortable being there and I would keep coming back and being like, oh, this is OK, this is a nice place to be in, whatever is going on outside of my life, I could kind of go there and forget anything else and just focus on writing.”

Student Writing Advocate

- The project leads gained extensive research material relating to project aims and curriculum design.
- The wider college community has responded positively and proactively to the initiative.
- The university will benefit from the development of a framework that will facilitate and support the introduction of writing in the curriculum.

What was the secret to success?

- The fact there was no assessment of their work:

“I feel like I think the fact that it's probably outside of the academic, like outside of the course outside of it made it feel less, not less important, but less serious in a way or less I don't know, I don't want to say the wrong words, but for me it felt less structured and therefore I felt better. Sharing it because I was like, it doesn't have to be perfect, perfect or it doesn't have to be like super professional because I said. I'm you know, it's not, I'm not getting grading graded for it, but it's not like some it's helping me another way and it's not like, yeah, it's. It felt that way, I guess.”

Student Writing Advocate

- The freedom the space gave students to communicate and connect:

“They don't have to buy writing in very perfect way, and I think it's also what Caroline encouraged us to do, like many people are not writing their English version, they start with their home language”.

Student Writing Advocate

- The teaching and learning strategies and tools employed ensured high levels of output and agency were established weekly within the room and independently.
 - The ‘collective’ element was key; a flat structure and collaboration between leads and students.
 - The Writing Advocates felt they were contributing to others and the university developing a greater sense of purpose and responsibility beyond their own needs.
 - The anticipation of final outcomes that were external facing; publication, exhibition and reading event.
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Were there unexpected outcomes/challenges?

We did not anticipate the impact this would have on individual's studio practice and their sense of self – this was particularly evident in students belonging to minority groups and students with neurodiversity. As a consequence, it also improved attainment for these students. For instance, a third-year BA Graphic Design Communication student used creative writing in their dissertation and improved by two grades, finishing with a 2.1 overall degree classification. They had spent two years within The Writers' Collective where they felt they found a voice to talk about their neurodivergence and incorporate this in their work.

“And then as I said I'm dyslexic, so I'm just neuro diverse in general and I felt like creative writing is a more accessible way for people that are neuro diverse to get involved because it doesn't just involve words and glyphs on a page you can use photography and all sorts of other things.”

Student Writing Advocate

Why should someone else adopt a similar approach?

‘Because it works!’ As an extra-curricular activity there was already a willingness to explore what the university had to offer, but the evidence from the students suggests that the combination of pedagogical tools and strategies along with core values and philosophies encouraged students to commit to the group and its activities.

Impact on Students

Evidence from MS Forms Surveys and films.

62 student participants gave feedback in both ratings and narrative.

Average score of 4.34 (out of 5) rating for Q: ‘Did you enjoy the creative writing activities?’

Many students expressed recognition of how this approach to writing could impact their course work and sense of self and voice. There is evidence of two BAGDC students who used creative writing to inform and develop their Unit 8 and Unit 9 projects.

Institutional Impact

The project has gained interest from a range of teams within the institute, including the Associate Dean for Student Experience, Academic Support, BA and MA Course Leaders, the Insights team (helping student transition from school to university, and the Exchange and Academic Enhancement.

It is scalable and we believe that this will change a number of things within institute:

Student voice

Belonging

Engagement

Attainment / Attainment gap

Writing within curriculum

Feedback from staff use of All Write! deck – impact on others

‘I liked the design and 4 areas. Working with them was straight forward, user friendly. There was nothing bad about it. I'd definitely like to try this at the beginning of next academic year, it would be great for our team to have an All Write! Deck’.

Next Steps

Future Developments

Research & Development

- *Writing and consolidation of research findings.*
- *Dissemination of research in the form of conference presentations and publications of articles in peer-reviewed journals and books.*

Devising of writing framework for courses

- *Development of a model/framework that enables inclusion and delivery of all forms of writing in its many forms (academic, creative, professional, reflective, positioning) in the curriculum.*
- *Presentation at UAL of how this framework can be implemented and working with stakeholders to help achieve it.*

Scaling of activities

- *Widen outreach and engage more courses.*
 - *Expand number of Advocates and types of activities.*
 - *Share All Write! Decks with all CCW courses + Academic Support Teams.*
 - *Add an additional set of cards with creative writing questions around 'climate, racial and social justice' (UAL guiding principles/global issues).*
 - *Create digital 'deck' to ensure accessibility when teaching.*
 - *Create additional paper + digital resources.*
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