



Developing Creativity in the TRS Curriculum

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Introduction

This paper reports on a two year project funded through the Higher Education Academy Subject Centre for Philosophical and Religious Studies (PRS) and the Centre for Excellence in Teaching and Learning: Collaboration for Creativity (CETL: C4C) based at York St John University. The project aims were: to develop and enhance modules in Theology and Religious Studies which links subject study (teaching and learning) with the disciplines of creative writing, literature and the visual arts; and to also devise assessment modes which provide opportunities for students to submit 'creative assessments' in the form of creative writing and visual artefacts as, potentially, the sole means of assessment. Although separately conceived, the two projects were focussing on the same kinds of challenge and always intended to complement each other; this report deals with them as a connected whole. While the project has highlighted issues and challenges that emerge when giving students the opportunity to do something creative, we are increasingly convinced that the potential for making deeper and more insightful links between religious and theological ideas and personal and cultural domains makes it a worthwhile risk.

By way of an introduction, we provide an overview of our project foci and outline our main objectives. We then explore notions of creativity in both national and local contexts and give an overview of a national survey and pilot study we ran and the subsequent stages of curriculum development. Following on from this we provide a selection of case studies which demonstrate student engagement with the modules. To conclude we offer some summative evaluation of our project and identify theoretical and pedagogical challenges as well as possible implications that a local project may have for the national context.

Project foci and intended objectives

The PRS funded project intended to focus on 'exploring the effective use of 'creative writing' and creativity in the teaching and assessment of TRS' whilst for the CETL project the focus was on 'developing effective strategies for the utilisation of a creative/creative arts approach to teaching, learning and assessment in the subject area'.

In total, the project objectives were to:

- investigate current approaches within UK Higher Education departments of Theology and Religious Studies to teaching the subject where creativity/a creative approach, in particular creative writing and creative art practice, is utilised in both delivery and assessment;
- explore, through student focus groups/extracurricular workshops, how students can demonstrate and employ 'creative writing' as summative assessment;
- develop a final level undergraduate module which directly uses critical engagement with creative writing in teaching, learning and assessment;
- enhance a current final level module, Religion and the Visual Arts, to incorporate a practical art based approach to assessment, through the employment of a professional artist/art educator to help students develop their artistic capacities through a series of workshops.

These broad project objectives translated into the following main actions:

- the development of a questionnaire that was electronically distributed to all TRS academics in the UK (as located through AUDTRS and a trawl of institution websites)?this basically asked 'what are you doing in your teaching and assessment that might be deemed to be innovative, alternative, creative and in particular in the area of creative writing and/or using creative art practice?';
- working with a self selecting group of level 1 and 2 students in extra curricular workshops, facilitated by a number of professional writers/creative writing tutors, to explore how effectively students can develop creative writing skills through a combination of workshops and tutorials to identify how these products can be used in a theology and religious studies discipline;
- reflecting on the creative writing workshops, the development of a final level module, entitled: Religion, Writing and the Creative Imagination, which incorporates a series of creative writing workshops and utilises creative writing as an aspect of summative assessment;
- the transformation of a final level module, Religion and the Visual Arts, to incorporate: visits to art galleries and museums in Glasgow; an experiential workshop day based in a regional Cathedral; a series of art workshops, facilitated by a professional artist/art educator; changed summative assessment from an essay with optional creative piece to the compulsory production of a piece of artwork with an accompanying portfolio commentary.

Creativity: theology and religious studies and the debate about creativity in

higher education

The discussion about 'creativity' in higher education, as exemplified in the Imaginative Curriculum Project (ICP), is not a debate about subject areas developing links with those disciplines that work within the broad field of the arts, including art and design, performance, music, creative writing etc. It is, essentially, a debate about teaching and learning; about what, how and why we want students to learn. It is a debate about whether we want to encourage students to be 'creative' thinkers and actors, how we understand the processes involved in students being 'creative' and how we assess the extent to which students have been creative.

The ICP argues that in debating these issues we are also debating the whole notion of higher education, what it is about and how it is carried out. The ICP does, in part, point to higher education as being the place where the future workforce is created with all the necessary knowledge, understanding, skills and application needed to maintain and develop our futures; it sees creativity as an essential component in this and therefore asks where in higher education do we find creativity being encouraged and facilitated. However, whilst acknowledging the inevitability of the links between higher education and the creation of a workforce it does not see this as its primary function. We read the ICP, as a narrative that sees higher education as being about learning for learning's sake, learning in a holistic way, and centrally concerned with expanding the ways we read and act on the word and the world. Jackson comments that:¹

Creativity operates on a continuum from the inventions and interventions that change the world, through those that change a domain, to those that have local and personal significance: 'a sort of personal effectiveness in coping well with unknown territory and in recognising and making choices ? life-wide creativity'²

He notes, and we agree, that higher education certainly has its impact at the personal and local level and subsequently has the further potential to make an impact in public domains. He also suggests that if we wish to see creativity evidenced we need to 'adopt and invent facilitative teaching methods'³ and to challenge:

transmission models of teaching where teachers attempt to transfer their own knowledge and sense-making to students through lecture-dominated teaching; where students' engagements in learning are predominantly based on information transfer, and are heavily prescribed and controlled by the teacher.⁴

The ICP acknowledges that creativity is hard to define, difficult to teach and difficult to assess. Contributors offer explanations as to what the concept might include in a higher education context and why higher education should be encouraging such as an element of the student curriculum experience. Jackson, drawing on the work of Dellas and Gaier, sees creativity as 'the ability to use imagination, insight, and intellect, as well as feeling and emotion, in order to move an idea from its present state to an alternate, previously unexplored state'.⁵ Other contributors to the ICP routinely use words like: imagination/imaginative, innovation/innovative, novelty, newness/new thinking, complex, divergent, criticality and others. These are skills and applications that we would presumably want to see being demonstrated by students in theology and religious studies; indeed many of us publish criteria in student handbooks that state in order to achieve work of a high standard (first class) we expect students to demonstrate 'creativity', 'imagination', 'innovation' etc.

If we are serious about students demonstrating creativity we have to ask how do we manage this, particularly in undergraduate contexts⁶ ?where and how do we teach creativity or how to be creative, imaginative and innovative? Do we model good practice to students? Do we provide clear opportunities for students to demonstrate such in their learning and assessment? Jackson notes that utilising 'ways of thinking or methodologies from other disciplines are often involved in creative acts. The blending and intelligent use of these [?] is potentially another source of creativity.'⁷

Indeed, we see this throughout the study of Theology and/or Religious Studies where many of us utilise a range of inter and multi-disciplinary perspectives ? in doing so, we, as teachers, and students in their endeavours to grasp the complexity of a multiplicity of disciplinary perspectives, are evidencing creativity.

Jackson and Shaw include 'being original', 'making use of imagination', 'finding and thinking about complex problems', 'willingness to explore in order to discover', 'making sense of complexity', 'thinking outside and transferring into the disciplinary box', 'synthesis, making connections and seeing relationships'⁸ as further evidence of being creative/demonstrating creativity. We are sure these happen in many theology and religious studies programmes already and that they complement a multiplicity of approaches to learning, teaching and assessment. The ICP does not set out to propose an 'either-or' model: either we transmit knowledge or we facilitate creativity; but it does argue for a balance between what it identifies as the more traditional higher education emphasis, where value has only been placed on critical and rational thinking, and the necessity to promote and value student (and tutors, as facilitators of) creativity in learning and assessment. We would argue that it is as possible to show creativity as much in a critical essay or a well-crafted and delivered seminar paper as it is in less formal learning and teaching contexts?you do not have to have students wielding paint-brushes or writing creatively to demonstrate such; however, it may well be that we over-emphasise the 'academic' and risk students producing mechanistic responses to the teaching and learning we offer which may well stifle creativity.

We think it is perhaps sensible to locate this kind of learning at the final level of undergraduate study, where students have had the opportunity to learn and practice 'academic' skills and have studied something of the content of the subject area. It is then that they are more able to encounter, for example, different disciplinary perspectives and approaches and bring these to bear on the task of thinking through problems, making creative links and positing new ideas related to their study of theology and/or religious studies. This is supported by the ICP, which acknowledges that students are more ready to demonstrate advanced levels of creativity at the end of their degree.⁹ However, when modules that demand such a creative response are located at the final level, given its somewhat experimental nature, module tutors have to be prepared for high anxiety on the part of students.

Project Objective 1: current approaches to creativity in higher education

The national picture

Initially, we were keen to find out if others were doing anything similar ?and if they were, whether we could learn from their experiences. We have followed with interest the discussions from the early days of the Subject Centre about different ways to teach and assess in theology and religious studies. Gilliat Ray's¹⁰ outlining of innovative teaching and learning methods, for example, mentions approaches that we too have been operating at York St John University for some time, like film and use of the Internet and her own use of art, which accords well with our own modules discussed here. She also talks of using drama and of one pre-course development experiment with group work in performance that may eventually feature as an assessment task. Jarvis and Cain¹¹ talk of various assessment tasks and mention writing other than essays, which move towards more of a 'creative' writing approach?newspaper articles, letters and 'production of imagined communications between contemporary historic figures'.¹² Denise Cush¹³ even mentions an enquiry by a student to use painting as a means of assessment? she stated it was not an accepted method at that point but concludes 'perhaps there are topics where a piece of artwork with an accompanying written piece might be possible'.¹⁴ It is clear from these brief descriptions that others are engaged in or at least debating similar activity, but how widespread is it?

We undertook to carry out a questionnaire investigation of current practice in Theology and Religious Studies departments. Through the University's Enquiry Based Learning project we were successful in securing a Research Assistant bursary to employ a student (final level) for 100 hours to aid us in the construction and dissemination of the questionnaire. Lauri Bower worked with us to send out and collate the returns and we appreciate her contributions to this aspect of the project.

Academics were sent the following questions:

- 1. Do you teach any modules exploring the links between religion and the visual arts, film, creative writing, media or creativity?
- 2. Within these modules does part of the learning experience include some creative element?
- 3. In relation to assessment, are there alternative methods to the standard written essay or exam?
- 4. Is this assessed by itself or would there be an accompanying commentary?
- 5. If this is the case, which do you assess, the final product, or the process, or both?
- 6. Are there any modules not related to the arts, which are assessed through creative means?

We received 82 replies that contained positive or qualified responses. 18 claimed to teach modules explicitly on or utilising aspects of the areas listed in question 1 and in all these cases assessment utilised alternative methods. 'Alternative' included generic reference to 'portfolio/ file' where students could submit creative elements as an aspect of the assessments, for example: scripts, film, radio programme, blogs and postings on WEBCT, oral presentation, drama, story-telling, songs?in the majority of these there would be an accompanying or integral 'commentary/' theological reflection' explaining and analysing the creative piece. In some cases the creative piece was assessed in conjunction with the commentary, in others it was solely the commentary that was assessed. In addition, there were some discrete assessment strategies which demanded a creative product as the mode of assessment (i.e. the creative product was not a part of a broader piece of writing but was the total assessment): DVD production, creative writing, journal, guide book; with these modes there was always an accompanying commentary. In response to question 5, all assessed both the commentary and the final product.

A further 25 responses identified modules on or utilising the areas in question 1, but where assessment was a standard essay and/or exam. Creative aspects (at least perceived by the respondent to be creative) involved in the learning experience included: showing film, looking at art, visiting religious sites/galleries/museums/theatre, performing a play. Three commented that students could submit creative elements in their assessment but none chose to do so; one commented that 'finding a means of fair assessment [fair criteria?] would be a barrier'.

A further 33 responses identified some, but minimal, focus on or use of areas in question 1 and with 'No' as the response to question 5. In one case, in saying 'No' to question 6, the qualification offered was: 'our school does not allow different forms of exam'?where exam presumably implies all assessment modes. A final 6 responses identified they did not teach on or utilise areas from question 1 but used to, intended to or wished they could.

The replies show that we are not unique in developing modules which focus on creative arts/creative writing with assessment which would include aspects of or be solely given over to the development of a 'creative product'. This is encouraging for us and the subject area as a whole (we believe). Time has not permitted us to follow up the replies, but we intend to and in particular to explore how colleagues elsewhere construct learning outcomes, assessment guidance and how they ensure parity and fairness in marking and feedback across assessment.

The local context: learning and teaching at York St John

University in theology and religious studies

For some time the department at York St John has delivered discrete modules which take as a focus areas like film, literature, the visual arts ?there is little unique in that these days.¹⁵ In addition, being a department located in one of the old teacher training colleges where, it could be argued, issues relating to learning, teaching and assessment have perhaps been fore-grounded more than in old universities, we have long engaged in debates about pedagogy and practice. We have worked hard to make sense of the language of learning outcomes, to develop a range of approaches to teaching and learning and to devise appropriate assessment strategies. Our methods have included

experiential and placement based learning, alongside field work and project work. We have utilised group work, oral presentations, non-standard written assessment, for example, research files, newspaper articles, learning journals as well as the more time honoured essay and textual analysis. We do not use formal written exams and have not done so for over a decade. To develop modules where students might engage in creative writing or in creative art practice and use their products as part of formal assessment, may be a risk, certainly a challenge; however, we believed there was something worth exploring in this notion.

We were faced by a number of 'challenges' around the efficacy of developing modules at undergraduate level which utilised a creative arts and creative writing approach to teaching, learning and assessment. Initially we had to make decisions about whether they would 'look like' our other modules in that there would be clear learning outcomes linked to assessment strategies with transparent assessment criteria. We were tempted to quote Jackson¹⁶ from his discussion about developing learning experiences for higher education that encourage creativity: 'Creativity is inhibited by predictive outcome-based course designs, which set out what students will be expected to have learned with no room for unanticipated or student-determined outcomes' and consequently to develop modules without learning outcomes (not that he advocates such, simply a move to more generic, process focussed outcomes). However, we did eventually develop clear outcomes, building on our experience of running a pilot project.

Project objective 2: exploration of how students can demonstrate and employ 'creative writing' as summative assessment

Pilot project

We had discussed developing a module of this type pre-project but it did not begin to materialise until the project funding was made available. We had little idea how students would engage with a creative writing module in theology/religious studies? what would they do, how would we facilitate it, what might they produce and how could this link with outcomes and assessment strategies that would sit neatly within the subject? The project allowed us to set up experimental groups. We employed, in the first instance, the expertise of a resident (to the University) Royal Literary funded writer and later a creative writing tutor to work with us and a group of self selecting students in a series of extra-curricular workshops. These ran over two terms and engaged students at first and second level. The experience included developing skills, working with different genre, exploring implicit and explicit religious and theological ideas.

Evaluation of pilot project

The first trial of workshops was loosely based on Julian Cameron's model for 'discovering and recovering your creative self.'¹⁷ While there are some good techniques and exercises here? particularly the recommendation to write 'morning pages' to help draw out creative insights, this moved significantly away from our aims to develop a module which fitted into our current curriculum provision. Basically, students ended up doing too much navel gazing resulting in many of the sessions developing into a type of pseudo-therapy. While this may be a valuable life experience and would certainly parallel creative writing modules elsewhere, it largely falls outside the remit of a taught module in theology and religious studies. This first workshop did however initiate a useful teaching and learning strategy which involved taking the students out of the university environment to surroundings that more readily stimulated creative writing.

For the second trial workshop, we employed a tutor who had past experience of teaching creative writing to students in higher education. Over a series of ten weeks of three hour sessions, she took the students through the various possibilities and skills that make creative writing effective. This engaged students and demonstrated that they were able to start writing creatively fairly quickly. One of the key things we learnt from both these trials is that the module tutor would have to help students make the links between creative writing *per se* and theological, religious or spiritual ideas and concepts. Having trialled the workshops these have become an integral part of the learning experience and

embedded within the learning outcomes and assessment.

Project objective 3: creative writing module

Our aim was to develop two modules that would demonstrate a clear conceptual and pedagogic framework. Given the York St John University culture of module writing they needed to have learning outcomes that were clear and unambiguous and assessment strategies that linked to the outcomes. In the following case studies we explain how the validated learning outcomes and teaching and learning strategies relate to these considerations.

Religion, writing and the creative imagination

Validated module outcomes

The learning outcomes link to assessment that requires a piece of creative writing with a supporting commentary. The outcomes were debated and modified by the staff team;

- ***Produce a piece of creative writing in a selected literary genre utilising skills and understanding developed through participation in creative writing workshops***; in developing this outcome we ensure that students view the workshops as an integral aspect of the module and hence participate. In limiting the 'final product' writing to a specific genre (although hybrid writing is possible e.g. fantasy-horror, sci-fantasy) we provide a framework for them.
- ***Demonstrate an understanding of intertextuality through the process of designing and writing a literary text with your own religious, spiritual or theological interpretation***; we felt this was a sound way for students to demonstrate how their writing draws on other texts, whether it is from their own life experience or literary/sacred texts.
- ***Evaluate how aspects of written language facilitate religious expression***; this outcome is reflected in the commentary and draws on reading and lecture input. It is an opportunity for students to show how well they have made sense of the module and the process they have gone through in developing their writing.

Teaching and learning

Some of the topics for the taught module include: the creative writer and the spiritual quest; the function of human creativity and imagination in theology and religious discourses; the use of story in World Religion; intertextuality ? particularly how the bible is used in literature; the use of parable and metaphor to convey religious ideas; religious and theological ideas present in Sci-Fi and Fantasy literature; holocaust writing; myth and the hero archetype; theopoetics: how creative writing challenges dominant discourses.

There are three key elements to the teaching and learning strategies. The first is the more conventional tutor led session?providing theoretical input and seminar discussion. The second, a series of creative writing workshops and the third, individual tutorials with both the module tutor, to discuss their ideas for their writing project, and with the creative writing tutor who provides ideas and suggestions for improving their creative writing pieces.

Students are provided with five afternoons of workshops lasting three hours. A tutor with expertise in teaching creative writing skills facilitates these and covers aspects of creative writing such as: story structure; characterisation; using the senses; genre?drama, journaling, short stories, poetry; and the more technical aspect of creative writing ?syntax, punctuation, layout and rhythm.

An example of how to encourage creative writing

We found the biggest challenge is to encourage students to put pen to paper (or finger to keyboard); it can be quite

difficult for students to 'open up' or allow the creative process to begin. One example of an approach that has helped was when we took students to the York Art Gallery. This proved useful in encouraging students to engage imaginatively with an object or idea as opposed to written text and theories. Students were asked to find a painting that they felt drawn to for whatever reasons. They may experience an emotional response; they may find it aesthetically pleasing; perhaps the subject matter is something they have an interest in or see as reflecting their own life experience or values. We suggested they might identify a background figure whose story might be interesting to tell; alternatively they might want to imagine a series of events preceding or following the moment captured in the painting that would subvert the obvious meaning. The task was to write a short story that does not exceed 300 words. They were told to write quickly and without too much attention to punctuation, spelling etc?any editing could be done later. Given the nature of the module they are told to keep a focus on the religious, theological or spiritual implications?although these do not necessarily have to be explicit.

After returning to University they were told to write up and submit for sharing. The students agreed that this was a useful exercise as it opened them up to the possibilities that they could think and write creatively. The writing that emerged was fascinating and included topics such as: imagining how the baby Jesus felt tucked up on his mother's lap; how a peasant farmer reconciled poverty, death and illness; how a medieval pilgrim was angered by the opulence of the church; how a giant human sculptured head represented the boundlessness of God; how a still life of bread and wine eclipsed the hectic life of a country vicar. This exercise is an example of a tutor led activity that helps students make the creative links between the process skills of creative writing and the expression of theological, religious or spiritual ideas and concepts. It also gives them a snapshot of what a piece of creative writing that forms part of their final assessment might look like as well as the confidence that the task is within their individual capabilities.

Assessment

Summative assessment is a creative piece of writing (3000 words) and a commentary (2500 words). The commentary should provide indication of the aim and rationale for the creative writing, identifying what the student wanted to achieve, alluding to textual influence/s and reasons for choice as well as rationale for decisions regarding style, language, and genre. In addition, students should reflect on the notion of 'creativity' providing a working definition; articulate how working through a creative project has impacted on their own learning and personal development and how it has aided religious or theological expression. Finally, they provide an analysis of their piece: What is it about? What are the key features? What is the overall dominant meaning or message they are trying to convey? How might it develop or challenge religious or theological knowledge and insight? What are the key intertextual allusions/influences and how have these helped to shape the piece?

Project objective 4: religion and art module

Religion and the visual arts

This module had been delivered for three years prior to the project. The project enabled significant changes to be experimented with and as a consequence the module was re-validated to incorporate these including an assessment strategy which asks for a piece of art as summative assessment.

Validated module outcomes

- Critically analyse a range of iconographic traditions and the work of selected individual artists in terms of their impact on religious ideas; this outcome draws on teaching and learning (lectures, seminars, input from art historians and museum/gallery experts) on the module and would be similar to other modules that explore links between theology/study of religion and the visual arts?the focus is on the use of art and images in world religions as well as the religious motivations and works of art from individual artists.
- Demonstrate a critical understanding of relevant theoretical perspectives on the relationship between religion

and the visual arts; as with the first outcome this derives from the teaching and learning experience. This explores issues such as iconoclasm and nature of symbolism, as well as different functional aspects such as iconographical, sacramental, prophetic and didactic. It focuses on how images work as religious text as opposed to the written word or conversely how images critique religious institutions or open us up to ethical and sacred possibility.

- Demonstrate practical skills in the design and production of at least one image; students are at liberty to produce an image that relates to theological, religious or spiritual import in any way they choose. While the image is the end point, it is not the focal point of assessment but stands instead as evidence of the process. The image is part of an accompanying portfolio, which needs to document the creative process and journey through the module by drawing on visual impressions in parallel to the reading associated with the above learning outcomes
- Reflect critically on the learning experience of the module with particular attention to personal, professional and academic outcomes; this is the final aspect of the portfolio where students provide a critical reflection on the process and production of an image/artefact, identifying the potential for theological/study of religion ideas. In reality it is impossible to separate these domains out or predict that students will gain, for example, skills that will transfer into professional life. We are considering whether we should perhaps adopt a more holistic approach where this learning outcome is more open so that students identify where learning has happened?

Teaching and learning

Much like the creative writing module, there are a number of strands included in the approach to teaching and learning: lecture and seminar learning which has included: What is Religious art? Sacred Icons; Use of Visual Arts in Ministry; Sacramental Art in Hinduism; Art/Museum vs. Faith/Temple; Sacred Images of Motherhood; Art and Religious Identity in Aboriginal and Holocaust Art; Painting as Theological Process; Iconoclasm in Christianity and Islam.

In year one of the project we planned a two day educational visit to Glasgow to engage with a range of visual material at Kelvingrove Museum, Glasgow Museum of Modern Art, The Burrell Collection and St Mungo's Museum of Religious Life and Art. Such an experience allows students to study first hand the intersection between religion and the visual arts. We accessed the expertise of curators and museum staff to help us understand and appreciate a whole spectrum of art: from 'Islamic', to Chinese, to Christian Icons, tapestry, architecture, carving, stained glass and other ecclesiastical art through to Dutch, French and Italian masters, Holocaust art, art nouveau and deco, modern art and artefacts and icons from various religions. The students were able to view a broad range of 'real' art and experience the varying emotions and feelings that such an encounter entails. It also provided students with insights into how art can be used to explore tensions in society such as the sectarian violence that Glasgow has historically experienced between Celtic and Rangers or Catholic and Protestant groups (an exhibition at Glasgow Museum of Modern Art). The violent attack on an image of Shiva in St Mungo's by a Christian provides opportunities to expand this into the divisions between Christian faith and other world religions.



In year two we re-validated the module to make the Glasgow visit an integral part of the learning experience. We also wanted to make the production of a visual artefact a compulsory element; however, we needed to ensure that students felt confident in their use of art media and considered one way of achieving this was to construct a series of full day workshops with a professional artist/art educator. We enlisted the expertise of a local artist and art educator, Jo Howes. In the first year most engaged in the workshops and the majority of these chose the visual image option for assessment?even students who felt challenged initially found the opportunity to be a rewarding one. In the re-validation we changed the assessment, removing the essay and making the production of an image with accompanying portfolio the only option for assessment. The workshops became an integral part of the module.

A new development in year two of the project has been a day workshop at Ripon Cathedral where students were introduced, by curate Rev. Dr. Nick Buxton, to a broad understanding of 'art' within a Cathedral context. This included discussion of architecture and sculpture, stained glass, woodwork and needlework. In addition, students were able to have a tactile experience of ecclesiastical vestments and silverware. The Heritage Officer, Toria Forsyth Moser, delivered a talk about the many mythological creatures and gargoyles found in the Cathedral and then conducted a tour of the Miserichords, stone and wood carvings. North Yorkshire Local Authority Art Adviser Jo York provided an artists view of the Cathedral, pointing out colours, textures and materials and discussed the different emotions these evoked. She also demonstrated various ways of capturing this in pencil and watercolour through a short workshop on drawing in situ. Following the workshop students were given time to draw and paint. Most importantly perhaps, this latest innovation gave students the opportunity to combine cognitive, experiential and creative endeavours in an integrated manner.



The workshops at York St John University focus on the development of skills using acrylics, watercolour, ink, pencil, pastel and oils. Students are introduced to various techniques?many very simplistic but that deliver an immediate impact. Jo Howes also discusses the work of specific artists and although she has no formal qualifications in theology or study of religion she is able to talk from the perspective of the artist about links between artistic expression and

religious and/or spiritual ideas. She provokes students to think how to represent feelings, emotions, theological and religious concepts in colour, shape, texture and links some of this work to artists like Rothko, Kandinsky, Chagall, and Dali.

Assessment

Summative assessment is a piece of 'art' and an accompanying assessment portfolio of 5-6000 words. In the module handbook students are guided to present their portfolio in such a way as to articulate 'evidence' and 'critical reflection'. Evidence would include: reference to a range of texts, documents and materials demonstrating they have engaged with the aims and learning outcomes. This will be different for each student depending upon the themes, iconographic traditions, artists and artworks they select and whether they base their 'image'/ final product on theological or religious studies theories and insights. In this section students are asked to focus writing on specific dimensions: Iconographic images from a specific religious context; the work of a specific artist e.g. Islamic, Christian, Hindu; art in context? reflecting on viewing art from the visits to galleries, museums and cathedral.

The exhibition

On the last day of the module students exhibit their visual images in a celebratory event where friends, family, tutors and other students are invited.¹⁸ Each student is responsible for displaying their work and has a guest book where visitors are invited to write comments on how they interpret the work, or how it makes them feel. This serves several personal, social and academic purposes:

- It allows the students to see their work as valuable in a nonjudgemental context.
- It gives students the opportunity to make their ideas public.
- It provides useful feedback and interpretation which students can incorporate into their critical commentary which is an integral part of the portfolio.
- It showcases the module for prospective students in year 2.
- It acts as a catharsis for the module specifically and the programme of study more generally.



Student outcomes

Case studies of student work

We see two purposes in our approach to creativity in the theology and religious studies curriculum: to consolidate and

develop learning from past and current modules and to provide personal transferable skills that will benefit students beyond graduation. The following are four cases studies, two from each module, which demonstrate how this is facilitated within the modules. One will focus on how the student explores specific theological ideas and the other has been selected because it develops themes more relevant to religious studies. While we draw on elements of student work and experience, the students themselves have been given fictional names. We indicate aspects of the work that generated a higher grade as well as weaker areas that would point towards a lower end pass. Additionally we identify personal, academic and professional points of development.

Module: Religion, Writing and the Creative Imagination

Laura: Mixed-faith relationships in the genre of 'chick lit'

Laura, a standard entry student, first of her family to enter HE and coming from a multi-ethnic city in the north east. Her short story follows a fairly standard story line plot: Muslim boy meets Roman Catholic girl; they face conflict in that her father tries to stop her seeing the boy and he threatens to cast her out; a near fatal car crash occurs; the father comes to realise that family is more important than religious differences; the boy is accepted and the girl is reunited with her family.

Tutor evaluation of the work:

The story drew on autobiography; it worked within the chosen style and did evoke an emotional response in the reader. It was highly readable and showed an aptitude for the genre. However, in relation to the aims and intended outcomes of the module it fell short on a number of fronts?both in the story itself and in the written commentary. The story did not relate specifically to Islamic/Roman Catholic traditions and related issues i.e. different attitudes to marriage and relationship, or practices that would cause conflict between a mixed-faith couple. There was scant development of key issues affecting religious communities in the UK in the commentary. The story could have been reflected on in relation to wider issues such as inter-faith dialogue, secularism, pluralism and Muslim and Christian identity. While there was reference to some popular films such as *East is East*, this was more of an afterthought. The module requires evidence of subject knowledge and demonstration of intertextuality which was largely absent in this piece. Stories of women being cast out of their familiar environment because they are deviant in some way is a common trope in literature of all sorts e.g. the story of Hagar in the Hebrew Scriptures; Tess' plight in Thomas Hardy's *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* or Jeanette Winterson's *Oranges are not the Only Fruit*. This meant that it was difficult to develop an analytical commentary that made creative connections with other texts. In this instance, the student lost contact with the academic premise of the module through a single minded focus on the creative product.

John: A fantastical account of faith development

John, a mature student with a working background in science, is a high achiever on the degree, a lifelong Roman Catholic but recently engaging afresh with his faith; his short story merged personal and fantasy narrative. Throughout he drew on a rich blend of emotive childhood memories, Roman Catholic traditions, historical and literary characters and biblical motifs in order to, in his own words, 'explore and exteriorize [his] own spiritual quest' from the innocence of youth to the mature understanding of an adult. It starts with an overview of the young child's life in the context of a range of religious teachings and rituals that are accepted and adhered to but which may not at that point have a significance or deeper meaning. Events take a dramatic turn through a traumatic near death experience following a road traffic accident. Whilst slipping in and out of consciousness in the hospital, the fictional character is taken under the wing of a kindly guardian angel or 'daemon' who takes him on a fantastical journey through time to help this frightened child cope with life's big questions and to help him understand his own religious tradition. By taking this child back through time to experience the struggling community of faith in the first century, then the debates around the second Vatican council he realises that he is at home in his faith through a sense of continuity that permeates that tradition.

Tutor evaluation of the work:

While the narrative drew on personal experiences from childhood and travels to Roman Catholic sites in Rome as an adult, the student developed this significantly through wider reading and making creative leaps between various texts. There were specific examples of intertextuality that included: biblical passages referring to ephemeral beings that guide humans; Homer's *Iliad* and the questing hero; Evelyn Waugh's *Brideshead Revisited* which has as its central narrative a conversion to Roman Catholicism; and Marcel Proust's *In Search of Lost Time Volume 1: Swann's Way*, which refers to childhood experiences and how the senses can trigger a response in adults which transports them back in time to childhood memories. From a critical point of view, John's story could be described as slightly contrived in that it ticks all the boxes a bit too neatly. Nevertheless it fully meets the criteria for creativity and intertextuality, and more importantly, it demonstrates that these connections have been carefully thought through and articulated in a well-crafted story. In a twelve week module it would be hard to expect more of someone who has no real experience of writing creatively. What makes John's work stand out is that he took time to reflect on the task and thus made pertinent decisions to ensure the end product was of value in relation to the set aims and outcomes of the module. Equally, because there was a sophisticated understanding of various literary elements and an ability to incorporate past learning from Christian theology, woven skilfully into a creative piece of writing, it moved beyond the personal into something that had universal appeal. In the commentary the student reflected on key theological themes in relation to the development of doctrines and teaching in the Roman Catholic Church and how individual Catholics relate to them. Through devising an imagined narrative to explore the tensions between personal conscience and understanding and the Church's teaching the student has been able to conclude that the faith community is itself informed and transformed by creative insights.

Module: Religion and the Visual Arts

Sara: Imag(in)ing a world beyond religious conflict

Sara, a standard entry student, is dyslexic and relies on the help of a writing support tutor to get the best out of her writing. Sara's final image shows a stylised version of the Israel/Palestine Wall which has been blown apart to reveal mystical possibility through use of a trail of translucent paint which trails off into a glowing yellow hued light. To either side, black silhouettes depict people torn apart by the continuing conflict in this area. Her inspiration clearly comes from British graffiti artist Banksy, whose work appears on the actual wall, yet it also moves beyond mere imitation to draw on and incorporate a range of religious insights.

Tutor evaluation of the work:

This module requires her to move out of familiar territory. The workshop which helps students to finalise the image does not happen until the penultimate week of the module. This is followed up a week later by a public exhibition of students' work where comments and interpretations are collected and commented on in the written element for this module. This causes some anxiety for Sara as she feels more secure if she gets her work done weeks ahead of the scheduled hand in date. Additionally, the idea of publicly displaying her ideas, which are somewhat controversial, added to her anxiety. As Sara wants to eventually progress to postgraduate study these are important matters.



Sara was profoundly affected by a visit arranged through the University Chaplaincy to the region. Whilst there, she listened to harrowing personal narratives from both Israelis and Palestinians that impressed on her the human tragedy of something that is normally conveyed to us largely through news reel so that we become desensitised to the reality of the suffering. Sara was left with unresolved issues and she reports that expressing this through a visual image gave her an outlet and allowed her to articulate a possible solution. While participating on the Religion and Visual Arts module she was researching and writing about Sufism, the mystical aspect of Islam for another module. She also had an understanding of Christian, Jewish, and Buddhist traditions from past studies and seems to draw on the notion of a mystical core at the heart of all religions. She tried to suggest that this identifies the potential to move beyond the differences around which conflicts arise towards a point of similarity and shared hope. Her visual image and the accompanying written commentary demonstrate a growing empathy with a range of religious perspectives, an ability to take an objective overview of the relationship between religion and sociopolitical contexts as well as demonstrating a personal learning trajectory where growing insights are consolidated. Sara achieved a grade above her average for this piece.

Stephen: An abstract portrayal of the Trinity

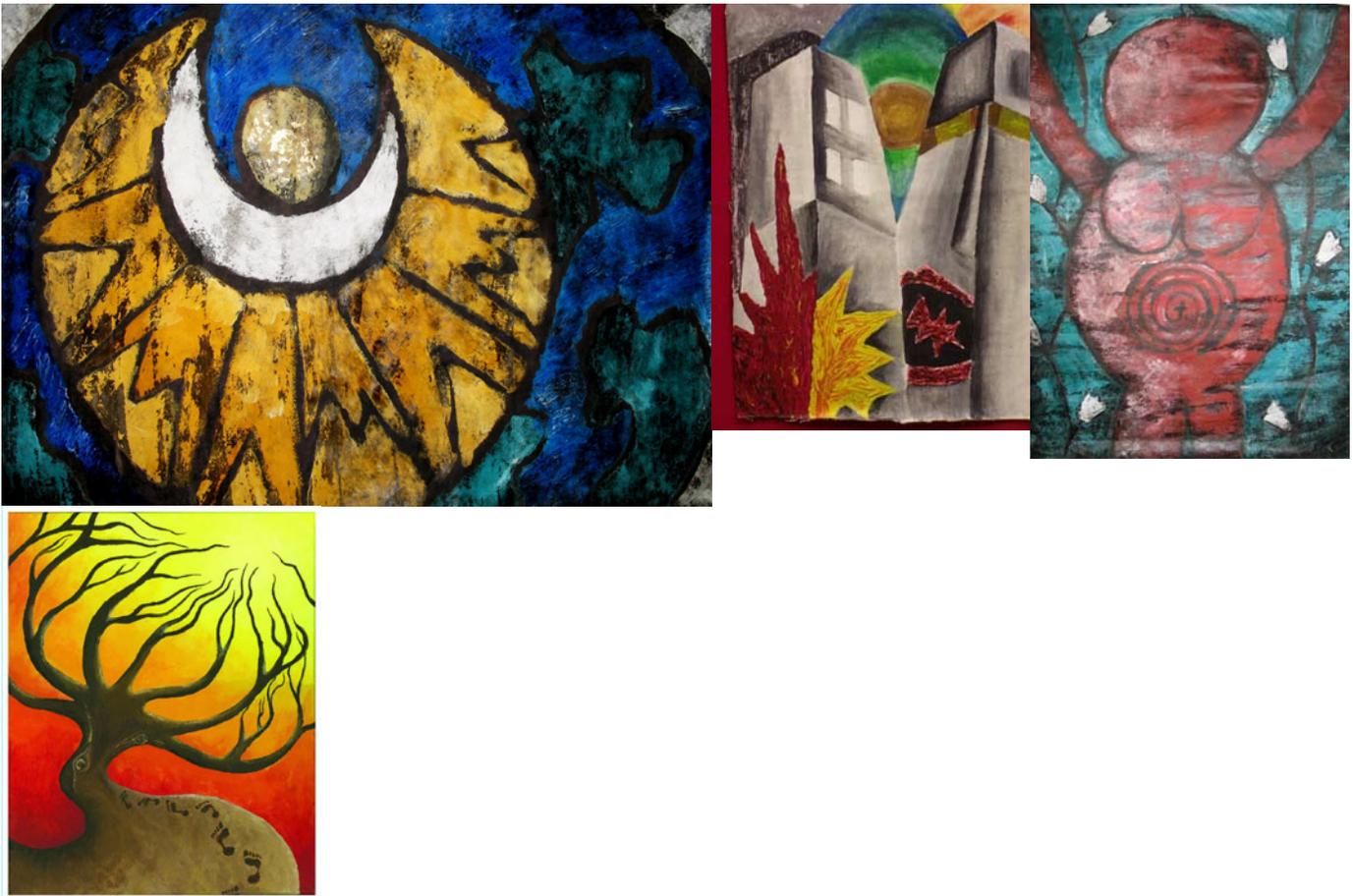
Stephen, a mature student, whose decision to study theology and religious studies was underpinned by his conviction in his future vocation as an ordained priest in the Anglican Church. He used an exercise from the workshop mimicking Rothko's use of blocks of colour to create an abstract image of the Trinity. There were three bands of colour ranging from a dark navy blue at the bottom, a yellowy green in the middle and a pale white with a tinge of yellow at the top. Between the colours there were some sketchy abstract shapes in white that blurred and confused the boundaries.

Tutor evaluation of the work:

This student did not appear to present as someone who had any particular interest in either the arts or being creative yet his final piece was aesthetically pleasing. He wrote a reasonable account of how this image conveyed a sense of the Trinity through exploring the symbolism? in particular how the blurred boundaries represent the doctrinal position that the Father, Son and Holy Spirit are distinct 'persons' and the unified Godhead. There was however a limited evidence of interconnection between the creative process, the image and the thinking it generated. For example, there could have been a development of how the image pushes our understandings of what the Trinity represents as a symbol of unity and relationship between humans, creation and God. While the reflection did show skills of interpretation it did not expand on previous understanding or indicate that there had been any personal or spiritual development as a result of making imaginative connections which would demonstrate an independent and creative approach to the task set. So although the final product was quite distinctive and could potentially invoke a range of theological responses, this student probably underachieved as his grade was slightly lower than his average grade. It is possible to surmise that the challenges of being creative was in some way perceived as a threat to firmly held religious beliefs so that the student took the 'safe' route through the module.



Other examples of student work



Facing: 'World Angel' by Leanne, top left: 'Towers of Terror' by Laurie, bottom left: 'Footsteps' by Emma and bottom right: 'The Annunciation' by Emma.

Student and tutor learning? a few reflections

While some students, as in the case of Laura, do not achieve a high grade it tends to be consistent with their overall profile. There are additional benefits, which in the case of Laura included: producing something that was of value to her; something that she could share with others. Most significantly, in this instance, the student highlighted that the process of writing a creative piece which empathised with an intimate relationship between two people of different ethnic backgrounds helped her to engage with and go some way towards resolving her own bias and negative

attitudes towards Muslims which she indicated as being endemic in her socio-cultural context.

Students may gain confidence through the workshops and move outside of their personal comfort zone to adopt a more holistic approach to learning. It is evident in the case of John, for example, that past experience was brought to bear on learning which enabled a more expansive understanding of the possible relationship between personal and public knowledge. Additionally, as the case of Sara illustrates, the creative process may provide an outlet for unexpressed emotions and help consolidate previous learning on theology and religious studies. The supplementary workshops are often evaluated as an enjoyable experience that brings back a notion of free play. Stephen reported that he could see the potential of using visual arts in his future ministry which means that the creative potential of his experience is still perhaps to be fully realised.

From a tutor's perspective, we can reflect on the fact that students should be guided to think through the choice of genre carefully. They should be encouraged initially to select a variety of possible projects, to work through the possibilities for each one and make final decisions further into the course. If students choose one at the start they feel reluctant to deviate from this and it might not be the best option to help them develop their creativity. In future, students will be asked to come up with at least three ideas and through discussion with tutors decide the best prospect for achieving the learning outcomes. Again this is where the tutor can facilitate the process and help the students make connections between their own quest for self-identity, relevant myths and stories, and knowledge in the subject area.

Drawing on autobiographical elements but developing the self as a fully fictionalised character (which John did successfully) may allow the student to move beyond an overly subjective, confessional approach which can act as a barrier to creativity. Students' personal experience and insight have to be taken seriously and teaching and learning strategies need to be developed that support this. However, we found that some tended towards the overly subjective and it was difficult to shift them from this focus.

Reflecting on discussions at a symposium at Glasgow University to discuss the relationship between creative writing and theology¹⁹ it seemed that the issue of subjectivity also arises within creative writing courses generally. While it is impossible to write creatively without drawing on life experiences, at the same time literature that is purely confessional has little value for the reader and prevents the writer moving beyond their own subjectivity. This can be dealt with in tutorials, class seminars and writing workshops to encourage students to fictionalise aspects of their life, add humour, hyperbole etc in order to depersonalise it somewhat. It can become a bit awkward for the tutor and painful for the student if after recounting significantly personal family traumas a tutor fails the work. We learnt that an intense focus on personal loss, drama or conflict failed to make the creative connections to other discourses and texts which the module outcomes required.

One of the key issues that have arisen is around the tutor's relationship with the creative writing and art workshops and the creative element of the summative assessment. Furthermore, to what extent should module tutors be creative themselves? In order to advise on the creative piece it would seem reasonable to expect that the module tutors should be involved in both aspects. Jackson *et al* argue that creativity within a higher education context from a tutor's perspective is evident through:

connecting in imaginative and useful ways the knowledge, application and process skills, and ways of seeing the world from a disciplinary perspective to the needs and interests of students so that they might learn and be inspired to engage in learning in the subject. 20

In this vein, the tutor would act as an intermediary between the workshops where creative writing skills are being developed, the themes and concepts relevant to the subject area of theology and religious studies, and the individual ideas that students want to develop in a creative piece. As an extension to this, Jackson *et al* have concluded that the tutor 'must act as a role model to show students what it means to be creative.'²¹ In the context of the modules

discussed here it does not necessarily mean that the tutor needs to be an accomplished creative writer or painter. Rather they need to demonstrate what creativity means in all tutor led activities by making conceptual and imaginative links between different discourses, subject related content, and subjectivities and context. A tutor's ultimate goal according to Jackson et al is about 'changing the way people see the world and helping people construct new meaning.'²² And this is what we hope we can move our students to develop in their own creative assessments. In the process, it has proved beneficial for the tutor to take part in the workshops not as tutor, but as a student, in order to empathise with the task and demonstrate a willingness to take risks, as well as highlighting that the desire to be creative is more important than the quality of the final product. After all, we, like the majority our students, do not have any specialism in the craft of literary writing or visual arts.

Finally, and importantly, it might be perceived that work of this type is more immune to the problems of plagiarism but that is not the case and in many ways it is more difficult to detect. As a result we reflect on the centrality of the workshop experience and whether the genesis and substantial creation of the creative piece should not be generated in the workshop time. This might enable a greater number to witness its creation and to offer feedback and comment.

Student and tutor evaluation of the modules

In the main student feedback has been positive about their experience. In comparing student achievement on our modules to their achievement on other modules it would appear that most do at least as well. But even though they might not achieve significantly higher grades their evaluation of the modules is good, they seem to have benefited in ways that move beyond getting a grade. Evaluative comments range from the general 'the most enjoyable module of the whole programme', 'this is what higher education should be about' to a more specific 'this has helped me in my PG CE interview'. A few students have openly evaluated the module as 'a life changing experience' while others are more low key and point to the assessment as providing 'a really nice change from writing essays'. It comes as no surprise that some identify 'a feeling of being outside my comfort zone' but reassuring to know that there are a significant number who report that the creative element has 'allowed me to develop deeper theological insights' or 'expand my own faith perspective'.

This suggests that students generally enjoy modules which allow them opportunities for creative expression and can identify that the experience opens up their learning. It is equally apparent that they feel it gives them additional value in relation to future aspirations. For some students, they are simply excited (or relieved) to be able to engage in 'something different' or what some students even described as 'relaxing' but most importantly a significant number identify where learning has happened and how the creative dimension has challenged them to see things in different ways.

Our project modules are elective and we attract a large number of students (c 20-35), one common factor for all is the concern that they will not do as well as they normally do in modules with a creative element. This is not just fear of failure because they are outside of their comfort zone but fear of failure in relation to damaging their chances of getting a good degree. What we try to achieve is an understanding that their creative endeavours are part of a whole process where they will be asked to articulate through a supporting commentary what they have been attempting to achieve. It is as the ICP noted in their evaluation of student feedback, an emphasis on creativity brings anxiety and 'a sense of frustration at a perceived conflict between being creative and being 'academic.'²³ Students want to engage in these kinds of learning opportunities and many can see the value of it but they do not always see that higher education supports this way of working. In our experience, students who would identify this as an area of conflict are quite right to do so and the frustrations are legion on the part of both students and teachers. Assessment criteria which highlight creativity, imagination, innovation etc as exemplifying work of a higher standard, but with little explanation as to what such means in practice, will contribute to student concern and frustration. To militate against this we explicitly teach about creativity, how it might be understood and how it might be exemplified in the context of our modules and an exploration of theology and/or religious studies.

When we first envisaged our projects we did not do so with an explicit agenda to enter the debate about creativity in

higher education, but in researching where our project might be located in the broader context of pedagogic work in higher education we are now motivated to continue this exploration. We also consider that there is more to be said about the specificity of our work utilising a creative writing and creative arts approach. We believe that there is significance in students actually creating artefacts that they then analyse and we are now interested to explore issues around brain function and being creative and how this might open up new ways of thinking for theology and religious studies.

We began with challenges and two years on we are facing more challenges as we continue to understand and articulate why we are doing what we are doing. We continue to reflect on the student experience and the impact on them of engaging in learning and assessment that utilises a method that may be, and for many is, new and therefore challenging. We wonder whether there is something more holistic about this as an approach to teaching, learning and assessment (and even in research), as against more traditional, didactic, tutor-led approaches. We are encouraged by O'Loughlin's²⁴ outlining of the work of Pattison who sees and cautions against a shift towards an empirical, scientific, preoccupation with the 'fetishism of facts'²⁵ for him in the study of and research into practical theology and, we might say, across the discipline. We value the contribution of empiricism and a scientific dimension, but we too share a view that in our teaching and learning in the subject we have to make space for methods and approaches that allow for 'subjectivity, insight, wisdom, intuition and the intrinsically valuable and interesting'²⁵ albeit supported and justified.

We hope that the modules as they are now configured provide students with an opportunity to engage with study of the discipline that demands they re-assess and re-present much of what they have previously learnt and understood. We hope that they are encouraged through being 'creative' to take these skills and the new insights gained of the discipline into their future pathways, careers and learning. We know that many will not return to the subject of their undergraduate degree?theology and/or religious studies, but we believe that this final level challenge will fit them well to be more creative, imaginative, and innovative human beings. For those that do return to be the researchers of tomorrow we are confident that this experience will encourage them in that endeavour too.

Conclusion

Based on student feedback and our own evaluation of the modules we are committed to offering them again and to finding ways of improving the experience for students. We are concerned that the module learning outcomes need to reflect more appropriately the possibility that students might determine their own direction of travel in relation to ideas, concepts, problems they will debate. To this end we will modify outcomes that appear to be too prescriptive in terms of subject focus and to open them out to be process driven and concerned with generic outcomes. We need to reflect more on process versus subject content outcomes not least because there would appear to be a growing discussion which suggests the slavish articulation of precise, subject focussed outcomes does inhibit student learning, particularly in a higher education culture which is beginning to debate methodologies like Enquiry Based Learning. We consider that it is important to discuss with each individual student what specific outcomes they want to work towards and to encourage them to articulate how and in what ways this enables them to demonstrate creativity in relation to the subject area.

To date we have not assessed the final product on its own merits ? these are not modules in creative writing or creative arts practice and we are not expecting students to demonstrate expertise in and proficient demonstration of such skills; however, it is vital that students see the creative expression as central to their experience of the module and consequently we will continue to dedicate significant module time to the workshops to enable students to learn and practice some level of skill within these disciplines. We think it is appropriate that students provide a commentary with their creative artefact and through this to be able to demonstrate their understanding of the process and meaning they are creating. We believe the written reflection is an essential element to maintain academic integrity and to protect students whose creative projects do not match up to expectation.

In conclusion we need to ask if this development has enhanced the student experience. We believe that it has and that it has the potential to do so more, as we understand better what we are doing. Overall the evidence suggests that

the modules enhance student ability to reflect theologically and make conceptual links between theology/ religion and literature/visual arts.

Our project has been what John Cowan describes as 'active experimentation'.²⁶ Rather than take a predetermined or established teaching and learning strategy this process has been organic, it has evolved and to some extent the student experience has driven the final outcome. We started with a strong inclination that if students engaged in creative expression through writing and art practice and linked this with their on-going and newly developed knowledge and understanding of the subject area they might stimulate, provoke, unlock new ways of thinking that would be more creative, more dynamic, more holistic, more affective. Jackson states that 'nurturing students' creativity in higher education is best achieved through a process- or activity-based curriculum that engages students in challenging, novel and unpredictable ways of working and learning'²⁷ and our approach certainly takes this seriously.

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Endnotes

- We acknowledge broad links to the work of Paulo Freire in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (London: Penguin, 1972) and his treatise of moving away from a banking concept of education.
- Jackson et al, *Developing Creativity in Higher Education: The Imaginative Curriculum* (London: Routledge Falmer, 2006), p. 209.
- Ibid. p. 210.
- Ibid.
- Ibid. p. 8.
- Some might argue it is easier and possibly more appropriate in post-graduate study where we are looking for work of potentially publishable standard and contributing to new knowledge, understanding and application.
- Ibid at p. 100.

- Jackson, N. and Shaw, M 'Developing Subject Perspectives on Creativity in Higher Education' in Jackson, N. et al, *ibid.*, pp. 95-101.
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