**Research Informed Case Study**

**APSS – Screen School – Professor Catherine Cole**

**The Importance of Field Trips for Postgraduate taught study in creative writing**

Professor Catherine Cole has been a Professor of Creative writing for 20 years in several Australian and UK universities, including at LJMU for almost seven years. Cole’s research has included academic, theoretical, and creative outputs and the conjunction between each of these has played a vital role in her writing and research, whether in creative nonfiction, articles and essays or fiction. This has informed all her teaching and postgraduate supervision of which there are currently 32 PhD completions, all with creative/theoretical theses in a diverse range of genres, styles and approaches. A number of her students are internationally renowned, and their doctoral theses include *All that I Am* (Anna Funder) and *Mrs Van Gogh* (Caroline Smailes). Cole also has published key texts incorporating her own travel and international research and these have informed her research-led classes in writing. They include *The Grave at Thu Le* (a creative work based on research on French colonialism in Indochina in archives in France and Vietnam), *The Perfume River* (in which Cole worked with leading Vietnamese writers to anthologise their work, *The Road to Dien Bien Phu* ( a book written by General Nguyen Giap which Cole edited in Vietnam) *Sleep*, a novel set, in part, beside Paris’s Canal St Martin which Cole researched in Paris during her 6-month writer’s residency.

## Of particular interest to Cole’s research is the way in which mature age students who enter a postgraduate taught degree, can write, and contextualise their writing within the broader framework of their lived experiences. She has written about creativity as an important ‘spark’ in the development of ideas, most notably through the writings of Csikszentmihalyi and Vygotsky, where creative play and engagement with texts form a crucial part of any creative writing workshop. One of her key research questions regarding each new MA Writing cohort, is how the interplay between research, theory and creativity, can shape the writing skills of her students. She is also a strong advocate for the ways in which experiencing ideas through field trips, museum and gallery visits and travel widen a student’s ability to reflect upon and write about their world. She has tested these ideas though a range of activities in the MA Writing. After each excursion, her students create student booklets, drawn from their experiences. These offer the students additional skills in reflecting, writing, editing and disseminating their work.

**Specific project – How do field trips and place-based writing enhance the PGT experience?**

The specific project which best reflects these ideas is that of MA Writing field trips and class exercises which result in student booklets for dissemination to the wider community. In 2019, for example, students wrote and designed a collection of stories based on the theme of ‘Liverpool 500’ a series of 500-word short stories about places in Liverpool in which they attended various cultural sites. The collection was shared between class members and staff, family, the Merseyside community and on-line with Australian students who were participating in a similar exercise in Liverpool, a suburb of Sydney. In all, the booklet reached over 1,000 readers/online viewers.

In 2022 MA Writing students participated in a field trip to Hilbre Island during which they wrote and took photographs to illustrate their work. This too resulted in a booklet of student work which has now been widely circulated in Merseyside, at Hilbre Island open days and on the Facebook site of the Friends of Hilbre Island Group – a network of more than 1,200 people. The booklet is also distributed at LJMU events such as Open Days and research events. Both projects demonstrated to students the power of writing and sharing their work at a minimal cost and through both traditional and social media forums. For many this has been a first step towards publication and confidence in sharing work beyond the classroom or workshop. It has built a greater understanding of the power of self-initiated work which isn’t dependent on more restrictive traditional publishing channels.

These exercises also build student confidence about submitting their work to publishers and agents, entering their work into competitions, and reading their work in public. For example, a number of the MA’s recent graduates have been published (Davidson) or picked up by literary agents (Kerry and Watkins). At present 8 of the MA Writing’s recently completed and current first and second year cohorts have been shortlisted for the writing competition ‘Pulp Idol’ which is run by Writing on the Wall in Liverpool.

**Paris Field Trip**

In 2023 MA Writing students undertook a field trip to Paris as part of an APSS QR funded research project. Of the 8 student participants, only 2 had previously visited Paris so the field trip offered new ways in which to observe and support active research in a place of cultural difference from their own lived experience. Cole had previously been a writer in residence at Paris’s prestigious Cite International des Arts, so was able to discuss and share her knowledge of the city. She also offered insights drawn from her own experiences and writing about the city, including essays and passages from her Paris based novel *Sleep*. Prior to travel, students attended briefings regarding language, culture and writing and were set the class exercise of writing about the city, all of which will form part of the trip’s research report.

This field trip was significant in a number of ways:

* For most of the students, used to writing in spaces around Merseyside, the challenge of a new, European and linguistically different place offered challenges and opportunities hitherto unknown. Managing any travel anxieties also formed an important learning outcome regarding confidence, communication, and creativity.
* The project allowed a greater immersion in the unfamiliar through theoretical concepts taken from the classroom to be experienced on Paris’s streets – such as Walter Benjamin’s writing on the flaneur or Roland Barthes’ writing on writers. This was a key opportunity to address cultural diversity in theory, practice and lived experience.
* The project offered existential opportunities and reflections, especially those associated with the imagination and the ways in which we have ‘lived’ a place through cultural mythology even if we have never visited it.
* Once in Paris the students were encouraged to travel collectively as a group and also alone – these opportunities were built into the 2-day visit to include joint tours on metro and Tootbus but also solo flaneuring exercises during which the students collected material for their writing.

As a research outcome of the trip, the students are producing a booklet about their experiences. It is currently called ‘Paris, Before, During and After’ and will features work written before going on the trip, during and after it. As with previous such exercises, the booklet will be widely shared and discussed to build creative confidence and to disseminate their writing and ideas.

As one student wrote of the trip:

*Paris, the enigma that I held in such high regard. A Paris that grew in my head to be a hero that might be too good to be true. But no, it was everything I hoped for and so much more.*

*It wasn't just the sense of camaraderie of our group, it wasn't the amazing food, friendly Parisians or even the amazing iconic tourist spots. It was the air that Paris lets you breathe that stole my heart and my mind. The atmosphere is a feeling that sinks into your soul.*

*Leaving Paris is not sad though because, just as I know I have more to write about than ever, I know I will be back to breathe it in once more.* (Owen 2023)

**Impact on curriculum**

Field trips such as these enhance curriculum in a number of ways, most notably by taking students away from their weekly classes and into the wider community. The taught MA Writing is generally a small cohort of between 6 and 14 students annually, so classes are intense and highly collegial. Most students already have professions so are doing the degree for personal satisfaction and reasons of lifelong learning rather than vocational change. For example, our most recent cohorts have included lawyers, social workers, administrators, academics, journalists and entrepreneurs with their own businesses. All wish to improve their writing skills and to publish their work. That they have been unaware of a range of self-directed opportunities as well as more traditional outlets for their work is one of the first significant learning priorities of the degree. Field trips and the writing that results from it highlight an individual writer’s options in regard to sharing and publishing their own work.

Building field trips and student projects into the past 5 years of the MA Writing has made the degree a stronger and more challenging learning experience. To achieve this, Cole has drawn on her international research experience with a wide range of writing programs in different countries. The students now learn more about writing practice and theory and can test their ideas in the wider local and international community. They also have a greater understanding of their own strengths and creativity: they have tested these in new places and cultures, and this has been personally and creatively empowering.

As another student noted:

*Three things strike me about our recent research trip to Paris. First, improved relationships across the group. The opportunity to spend some extended time in each other's company not only built more trusting relationships, but also facilitated the sharing of our backgrounds, our interests, our influences as writers. The resulting enhancement in trust and understanding has meant that as we review each other's work, we not only have a better grasp of where each of us is coming from, but also that critique is in service of the work, and not a judgement. Second, shared experience. The opportunity to explore (what was for some) a new city - the sights, the sounds, the smells, the language, the culture, the food - provided us with a range of common points of reference that continue to ripple through our conversations and our writing. And third, inspiration. The opportunity to walk around the city, if not in the actual footsteps, of some of the writers who we admire - for me, Roland Barthes, Pierre Bourdieu, Michel Foucault, Simone de Beauvoir, James Joyce, Oscar Wilde, James Baldwin - provides some sustenance to draw on when our writing muscles need an energy boost*. (Flinn 2023)

**Broader change**

Cole’s research associated with creativity, writing, hybridity in approach and skills building have informed a dynamic student experience through field trips and the booklets written as a result of these. Students proudly share their work and build confidence in this process. The MA Writing students have also had the opportunity to work closely with experienced published authors such as Cole and visiting writers, editors, and industry professionals, each of whom reiterates the need for new writers to gain a diversity of experiences from their degrees. This includes the ability to move confidently in the world and to manage the fluctuations of a creative life. If a publisher is indifferent to their work, they can deal with rejection and publish independently in their own ways. Through sharing travel, visits, writing and a dissemination of their ideas, students also build a strong sense of who they are in the wider cultural continuum. That they have visited cultural sites in Paris, negotiated the metro, shopped or communicated in a new language and ordered food in a café also fulfils the creative need of any new writer. They now can relocate themselves in a wider sense of what it means to be creative in a range of cultural experiences.