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Creative Writing at the Museum

Students at Cardiff University's Department of Lifelong Learning have been attending creative writing courses in Amgueddfa Cymru-National Museum Wales. I can't think of a better location for would-be writers. It is a wonderful place to look for inspiration, develop skills and gain the necessary confidence to present your work to others. The National Museum in Cardiff is unique amongst British museums and galleries because of its range of arts and science displays. Under one roof, visitors can see world-famous works of fine and applied art and explore natural history, geology and archaeology collections.

Attracted by the range of items on display and exhibitions reflecting the latest research, students who enrol on these courses are often specialists themselves. Some have scientific or technical backgrounds; others are more at home in the world of sculpture and paintings. What I find exciting about this mix of people is the fact it can lead to lively discussions about specialist vocabularies and experiments with different styles and forms of writing, juxtaposing the 'languages' of the sciences and arts.

Take a recent session on botanical illustrations. With the help of Maureen Lazarus, who researches Vegetation History at the museum, we turned the pages of herbals and listened to stories about the illustrators: Elizabeth Blackwell, for example, who worked on the illustrations for *A Curious Herbal* to support her family after her husband was sent to debtors' prison. In a follow-up session with Professor Terence Turner, a retired professor of pharmacy, we gained a more contemporary understanding of the properties of plants, medicinal and poisonous. Access to accurate information empowers creative writing students, giving them the confidence to dramatise scenes from the life of a historical figure, and write vivid descriptions of scientifically accurate illustrations.

Students who have spent their professional lives synthesising data or producing factual reports often welcome the opportunity to set their imaginations free and invent fictional characters or experiment playfully with form. Those who have specialised in the arts or humanities can find it just as refreshing to look for inspiration in the precise language, images and concepts of science. What better prompt for a writer than the curious fact that Linnaeus classified plants according to the number and arrangement of their reproductive organs, which led to the classification of a group: Class Cryptogamia (or 'plants with a hidden marriage'), lumping together algae, lichens, fungi, mosses and ferns? Creativity seems to thrive in an atmosphere of discovery and debate; we often find ourselves questioning and testing preconceived notions. Students learn to be open to novel ideas, and because they have a ready-made audience in the group, quickly learn to write to entertain and sustain interest.

In response to a rolling programme of exhibitions and changing gallery displays, I design new courses each term, arranging visits behind the scenes so that each group of students has access to stories in the collections. Inviting museum curators, professional writers and academics to give talks or take part in workshops enriches the experience for the students and extends their grasp of the subjects studied. In the classroom we read extracts from the work of published writers to learn about different forms and techniques, becoming familiar with fundamental concepts of creative writing. I also try to make sure students have opportunities to read their own work aloud to the rest of the group, so that they can learn how to give and receive constructive feedback.

How do I plan courses like these? Because the museum is constantly evolving, the process is a combination of necessity and chance. In early 2010, for example, I was warned that several key galleries would be closed for building work. Just when I was beginning to think my next group of students might have to look outside for inspiration, I happened to hear Philip Gross on the radio, reading from his collection, *The Water Table*, on the day it was announced he had won the T.S. Eliot Prize. That decided it: the Severn Estuary was to be our theme.

Several curators kindly agreed to talk to us about their work, so we could learn about the geology, archaeology and marine biology of the area. One very hot day in June we looked at some stunning pieces of ceramic and glasswork from the museum collection, chosen specially for us by Rachel Conroy, a curator in Applied Arts, after reading poems from *The Water Table*. The previous Saturday, some of us had travelled by boat to Flatholm, a nearby island, to see the Severn Estuary from another perspective. Reading and learning about the natural history, archaeology and geology of the estuary, and experiencing it for ourselves, helped us feel better equipped to appreciate and critically evaluate the work of the published writers who have made the area their subject. The work the students wrote that term was as varied and shifting as the landscape, seascape, mudscape itself. What made our final session very special was Philip Gross agreeing to join us, to read from *The Water Table*.

As those of us who teach in this sector know all too well, there is no typical lifelong learning student. Some turn up not knowing the difference between prose and poetry, or how to use a computer. Others may have had negative experiences of mainstream education; others have PhDs, or other professional qualifications. The challenge is to present source material and ideas to stimulate creative thought in ways that everyone can relate to. In the course description, prospective students are told that there will be no formal examinations. Instead, their tutor will offer advice and work out a scheme of study which is intended to bring out the best in them. The basis of the assessment will be a portfolio of creative writing consisting of their best work produced on the module.

Suggested reading before the course starts includes *Working* by Studs Terkel and *Dart* by Alice Oswald. Believing everyone has 'pertinent comments to make',

the American oral historian and Pulitzer prize winner Studs Terkel's great skill was to discover the ways in which 'ordinary' people try to give meaning to their lives and to select key extracts of his interviews, or conversations with them. *Dart*, a collage of different registers, is a book-length poem in which Alice Oswald alludes to myth and literature whilst employing colloquial speech and the language of scientific and technical processes to explore the mutability of the river and people connected with it. Both volumes introduce students to innovative writers who have experimented with real-life recordings and factual material, in order to explore their chosen themes.

When meeting a group for the first time, I ask the students to talk about why they have joined this particular writing class, to get an idea of their expectations. I provide handouts each week, to outline that week's activities, provide further reading suggestions, links to internet sites for further research, and up-to-date information about events and competitions. When I design writing exercises or homework topics, I do my best to make sure they are as inclusive as possible. Collecting homework each week and giving one-to-one feedback on first drafts makes it easier to attend to individual needs. I like to tailor my comments to suit each individual and identify those with special needs or abilities. Encouraging students to work on second and third drafts encourages them to think about presentation and editing, which helps when they are preparing pieces for assessment.

What I like most about teaching in the museum is access to the collections and being able to draw on the expertise of curators, who are remarkably generous with their time when asked to talk about their work. We have been introduced to subjects as diverse as Dead Man's Fingers, a Rembrandt portrait on loan from a private collection and rare astronomical books. What better inspiration for a would-be writer than hearing the story of Rembrandt and Catrina Hooghsaet in the presence of the original painting, or turning the pages of a 16th century volume of astronomical studies containing movable paper instruments - volvelles – designed to solve calendar problems and find the positions of the sun, moon, and the planets?

Students learn a lot from each other, so I try to leave as much time as possible for group discussions. We don't break for tea or coffee during the two-hour sessions, but we can always get together in the museum café before the class starts, and when the session is over. Asking students to give a presentation is a more formal way of initiating student-led learning, but it can be nerve-racking for those who lack the necessary confidence. In the final week of each course, students read out short pieces of work to an invited audience of curators, family members and friends. Oral work can count towards their final assessment and, with the right kind of support, students can see it as an extension of reading in class. Very few opt out.

I hope each session is enjoyable as well as informative. When I first started teaching in the museum, I think I tried to pack too much into each session. Now I adopt a more relaxed approach. But students expect good value and they like to be challenged. For me, the definition of a good session is one in which we forget ourselves. This can only happen if students feel they are not going to look foolish. If they want to share their work, it is important they know it will be received constructively.

Creative Writing at the Museum has been publicly acknowledged to be an innovative and inspiring course. In 2008 students had their work compiled in an anthology entitled *Pictures at an Exhibition*, a collection of writing inspired by a major exhibition – *Industry to Impressionism*-- which explored the stories behind the art collection that was bequeathed to the museum by Gwendoline and Margaret Davies. Student work written in response to classes organised in the build up to the 2009 *Darwin in Wales* exhibition was accepted for publication on the Museum web pages.

Students have said that the one of the best things about coming on a course like this is its location. They love visiting the galleries, going behind the scenes and being encouraged to write something based on curator-led sessions or information about museum artefacts. Such experiences enable them to write poetry, prose and drama scripts that they would not otherwise have produced. A venue like this encourages a sophisticated approach to writing, one that considers audience as well as content and style. It is also liberating for students, to learn about new subjects and to think about researching stories and poems themselves, finding voices for dramatic monologues in diaries and letters and other accounts of real lives. As one student recently said to me, 'I was relieved when I discovered I wasn't going to be asked to *imagine* something to write about, to always concentrate on the *personal*, but to look for inspiration in stories outside myself.'

Engaging with inspirational resources in beautiful surroundings and participating in classes in which group work and creativity are actively encouraged can be a life-enhancing experience for everyone involved.

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