Getting to know you, getting to know all about you: how does text-based communication affect the way we relate?

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Abstract

The use of multimedia increasingly allows us to simulate experiences online that are closer to those we have face-to-face, but text remains a dominant and technically straightforward simple format for online communication, especially within the context of creative writing courses. But how do we relate to each other through text? What is the effect of communicating this way? How are our impressions of each other formed?

In this paper I identify some of the factors which influence how we make our interpretations of each other through text- based communication; and explore the way that participants come to feel about each other within an online creative writing course, where working together with peers is an integral part of the course design.
Set at the early stages of my research, this paper is the result of a small exploratory project designed to identify key avenues for inquiry. The snapshot produced from responses in five interviews highlighted three key points:

(1) Participants speculate about what they do not know about each other; extrapolate from clues in the content and style of each others' writing both consciously and unconsciously; and project into gaps in information in ways that sometimes reveal more about themselves than bear relation to their co-participants.
(2) An underpinning objectivist epistemology that holds there to be an external and true reality may serve to colour participants' experiences when they do not have access to the cues with which they are familiar. This may lead to them doubting the 'accuracy' of their interpretations of one another though the text they read online and in turn may contribute to feelings of uncertainty.
(3) Consideration needs to be given to the way that interviews are used to gather this type of data, with attention being given to enabling participants to articulate their feelings. This includes taking account of interview medium, pre-existing relationships and the difficulty in finding language to articulate what is felt.

I present more questions than answers, but suggest that further inquiry should focus not so much on individual participants and the internal worlds they project, but on pursuing an interactional model that can provide 'a robust framework for analysing intersubjectivity' (Hutchby, 2001). Some of this inquiry may draw from the practices and theorising about creative writing, and I suggest that in turn understanding may contribute to ideas about creative writing course design.

Keywords

Intersubjectivity; affect; communication; liminal space; creative writing

Background

Over a period of some nine years developing and managing online learning programmes I became fascinated by the creative writing courses that we offered. It was the writing process that intrigued me and the way that students took shape through their writing style and preoccupations. For the last three of these nine years I became a writing student myself, curious at the way I found myself relating to my fellow students through their poetry and prose and snippets I picked up through their critiques - both online and in undergraduate workshops. This curiosity eventually developed into my research: to explore the way that relationships develop in those environments where there is no design for face-to-face contact and relationships between co-participants is based on a mix of readings and critique of each others' creative writing and informal discussion.

Although many people I had encountered while I managed the online programmes carried an assumption that working online was second best, I did not start my research with the presumption that online learning was lacking in comparison to its face-to-face counterpart, rather that it was different. I started from a position that regarded the paper-based distance learning creative writing courses in the programme as being at one end of a spectrum in terms of intensity and 'intimacy' and the online courses as being at the other; with the face-to-face courses being somewhere in between. I took the view that having this range available meant that students and tutors could work within the medium that suited them best. One online tutor contended that the intensity of the online environment served to produce greater learning outcomes for those who engaged with it fully. The issue for me was to find out just what enabled full engagement and what got in its way.

This paper draws from the data I gathered from a small exploratory project at the beginning of my research last year. The aim of this project was to test my research questions with a small number of volunteers and identify how far the kind of data I was interested in could be accessed and the nature of what it could reveal; with a view to building on my findings in a more substantial project to follow.

Research Design

This section outlines the intention and process of my data collection.

My exploratory project plan was concerned with finding out how participants had interpreted and felt about each other in an online creative writing course, how text had mediated the process. As this was primarily a study to find out whether I could access the kind of data I was after, I opted to work with a small group of people who had already completed a course together some while previously, rather than set up a course and explore experiences as they occurred. While practical, this did mean that the project had a number of constraints, as I shall outline.

My participants were drawn from responses to an open invitation to take part in my research. From an email sent to some 350 people who had taken part in any of a range of Continuing Education Creative Writing online courses in recent years I received fifty responses from people willing to take part. These courses were anything from four to six months long, for beginners through to more experienced writers (although accredited at first year undergraduate level) and in a mix of genres (poetry, short and long fiction, writing for children). From the fifty volunteers, I selected five for this study on the basis that they were all participants together on the same online course that took place in 2008 – this particular course was selected as it had the most volunteers together in any one of the online creative writing courses archived within the University's Virtual Learning Environment. All these volunteers were female, four aged between their late forties to early sixties and one in her eighties. This reflected the gender and age of the majority of the volunteers and is something which should be borne in mind when considering the data collected. The course was one of the advanced level courses that accommodated student writing in a mix of genres. As with all the courses in the programme, it was designed around an approach where students presented their creative writing for peer and tutor critique. Writing was constrained by a 1500 word limit per monthly submission but was otherwise largely undirected, except for a course etiquette that required students to post a warning-for-the-wary if their writing contained swearing or violent or sexually explicit activity.

My intention was to use the course archives as a prompt and a frame for students to access and recall their interpretations of each other. At this point I was unaware whether any of the selected participants knew each other via any other medium than the online environment; though it transpired that three participants - who had

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met through the online courses - regularly 'SKYPED' together and two of these three also periodically met up face-to-face. I took the view that all contexts in this project could throw up useful data as I was scoping out the potential for further inquiry, so at this stage this presented no problem.

Interviews took place over a period of some three months. Each of the five volunteers was interviewed separately for approximately one hour, one face-to-face, the remainder due to their dispersed locations opted to be interviewed via SKYPE with which they were all familiar. The effect of the medium of the interview on the data collected is something not explored here. There is not sufficient data from this enquiry to be revealing of whether or how this medium might have had an effect on the content or interaction, but, again, this is a factor to bear in mind. Interviews were semi-structured and aimed to draw out information about participants and their feelings about their co-participants, (questions fell into three broad categories: participant context, impressions of co-participants, specific interpretations based on interactions drawn from the course archive). The exploratory project was limited in its scope due to the lapse in time between when the course had ended and the study began. This lapse in time meant that participants were giving retrospective accounts and some interactions could only be recalled by reference to the archived transcripts of the course; but conversely this also meant that it was perhaps the more distilled, significant impressions of each other that participants recounted. For my part it meant that I was not able to observe the development of relationships to compare my impressions with those of the participants. All the same, after each of the five interviews I did make note of any ways that I was aware that participants affected me – or suspected that I had affected them - and included this as context to the interviews. I draw on this in a small way at a later point in this paper.

Interviews were all recorded and then transcribed. During this process of transcription themes began to emerge which I subsequently grouped by more closely analysing the transcripts to identify the ranges of participant experiences. I wanted ideas to come as much as possible from the participants' accounts, and for portions of the transcripts attempted line by line coding to separate out more clearly and pay closer attention to what participants were saying. The initial themes I had identified in sections of the transcript now seemed very broad and loose and I started to understand why I had seemed to be getting nothing new from the data beyond ideas that I had started with.

During the first two of the five interviews I stayed close to my interview plan which included drawing out participants' impressions from memory prior to them re-visiting the course archives. However, as this produced very little of note for my line of inquiry, I adjusted my approach and instead worked at ways to make it easier for participants to articulate impressions and feelings so that I might get closer to what they meant when they talked about each other. I tried approaches such as asking participants to visualise co-participants on a spectrum to identify how closely they felt they matched each other in terms of such things as confidence in writing or in their sense of humour. This worked in part, but again encountered the difficulty of articulating feeling. More productive was playing with metaphors: asking participants to describe co-participants as varieties of cake proved more revealing to me than the direct descriptions they gave of their impressions of each other. Not only did using metaphor side step the difficulty in articulating feelings directly but it also prompted some interesting lines of questioning and comparison which might otherwise not have been easy to identify or address. In my reflections after the interviews I noted that we had begun to harness a version of the techniques used in creative writing in order that participants showed me (rather than told me) what they felt. My experience of this approach that seemed to allow me more scope to feel that I was getting closer to participants' meanings chimes with the experiences related by participants in their accounts of each others' writing.

Drawing from the Data

This small project showed me that there was scope to get at useful data by my approach, though some modifications were needed to my research plan (such as a more open and responsive approach to interviews); and consideration needed to be given to a range of factors, (such as participant selection and level of acquaintance; medium of interview; and timing of interviews in relation to course experience). All this noted, this next section uses some of the data collected at this exploratory stage to identify a number of issues and raise questions for further inquiry. To do this, this section draws particularly on the experiences of two of the participants within the online environment, Eleanor and Denise. (Names have been attributed for the purpose of this paper). Denise, Brenda and Carol were the three participants who continued to meet up on SKYPE, and

Denise and Carol occasionally face-to-face, too. Annette and Eleanor had met none of the other participants in this study either on SKYPE or face-to-face.

Although there was a clear sense of benefit expressed by all the participants in taking courses in online format there was also a sense expressed by Eleanor that it was not an experience that provided as good a way to get to know people as meeting face-to-face:

> … it's really, really limited isn't it. All the things in a group that you would do in a group that you would pick up about people to do with hairstyles or you know gestures and all the rest of it aren't there. So you're kind of like you know you're trying to form a working relationship aren't you but without all of that. (Interview with Eleanor, lines 126-129)

Eleanor drew on what to her had become a common sense understanding of communication: that information received via non-verbal routes was far larger than that received verbally in any interaction. At the same time she did also identify that there was a wide range of information to be gleaned in written communication, but of this information she questioned the accuracy of her interpretations:

> Although it's all speculation really isn't it. You don't know, you don't really know these people - but I guess you do. I've certainly got kind of pictures of people and how accurate they are, I don't know, but it's just on written communication, isn't it, because … and the worlds they're kind of painting show their interests and the way they treat their characters shows what they think about people and what they have happen…. You know, you can tell a lot can't you from what people write, but whether it's accurate or not, I don't know, I don't know.
> (Interview with Eleanor, lines 133-139)

I draw two issues from Eleanor's responses: the first concerning the conversational interaction both observed and with her co-participants and her sense of its limits; the second about how accurately she can 'know' participants from their creative writing. The combination of these two issues leads her to uncertainty. And yet, although uncertain, Eleanor still has emotional reactions to her co-participants which form the basis of her relationship with them:

> **Eleanor:** I suppose what they say and kind of how they say it….I don't know… Like…something like Brenda said in one of her communications and I've never forgotten this. She said something like 'Laura's been rushing around like a hairy goat'. And I thought that was great.
> **Interviewer**: So what was the impression you got from the hairy goat thing?
> **Eleanor**: Right, well I suppose what I thought was that she was quite posh and sort of, you know of an age… sort of a time age…I just got this … I don't know… it was like one of these characters, head teacher in St Trinian's or something. It just gave me a sense of class I suppose. So a comedy, and sort of a lightness and a playfulness about her.
> (Interview with Eleanor, lines 147-160)

Further into the interview Eleanor talked about instances of extreme feeling in response to the writing and conversation of another course member, Wendy [not a participant in the study]:

> I didn't get a sense from reading Annette's, Brenda's, Carol's and Denise's stuff, I didn't have any kind of violent feelings. Violent feelings! *Extreme* feelings. But reading Wendy's work I actually did. And I didn't know if I was confusing that with these feelings I had about work and all the rest of it, or if it was just Wendy's stuff. I just ... I just found, I did find her work difficult to like. I don't mean that in a... I don't know Wendy, I don't know who she is... and who am I, just saying reflections on my experience. (Interview with Eleanor, lines 258-263)

Why does Eleanor doubt the interpretations she makes through text, but is less concerned about the conclusions she draws face-to-face? Does text based communication throw up issues of accuracy more than the face-to-face medium? Or is it that this question of accuracy spotlights the central role that epistemology plays in colouring our experiences? Underpinning Eleanor's responses is an objectivist epistemology that points to an external and true reality; a reality that Eleanor identifies as being more accessible in the face-to-face world. Given this

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model, the online environment appears lacking and the apparent limits on interaction through text appear to serve to conceal what is real.

An alternative epistemology that does not conceive an external and true reality but regards all knowledge to be contingent allows focus instead not on a lack but on the interaction between people and the way that their context shapes and is shaped by it. When the context and types of interactions are not those that prevail in our day-to-day experiences, might lack of fluency rather than lack of accuracy be what is missing? This point is taken up in the discussion in the next section.

That a face-to-face encounter can equally throw up questions of the accuracy of any interpretation does nothing to counter what Eleanor *feels* about the experience of the online environment. She misses that sense of 'objectivity' that she feels face-to-face. All the same, her responses and experiences are as powerful as if in a face-to-face encounter:

> (*Talking about Wendy*) The sort of voice that would grate at me if I was at a, if I was at a kind of like party or something, like if I was stuck with that person – (laughs) argh I've got to go now! You know. The kind of lack of rapport I think that sort of thing.
> (Interview with Eleanor, lines 291-293)

Eleanor was unsure of the origins of her very strong reaction to Wendy, wondering if it was coming in part from something that was important in her own context. Further exploration revealed that Eleanor held very strong feelings about fairness, equality and respect for others, that this was a strong driver in the work she had been doing in a theatre-based training company for the last twenty years. From a particular piece of creative writing Wendy had submitted Eleanor had concluded that Wendy showed little respect for and had little empathy with others – something in direct contrast to her own priorities.

In a separate incident, Denise was able to track back to identify associations with another participant to understand some of the origin of her feelings:

> **Denise**: ...because of the … handbag poem, I connect her (Annette) very strongly with this friend of my mother's, I only knew when I was a child because sadly she died when I was six or seven; but it just gave me such a strong impression of this lady that I always connected her with her
> **Interviewer**: Can I just check: the poem itself reminded you of this lady, who you then linked to Annette?
> **Denise:** That's right. That's it exactly, yes, yes. I think with Annette I have this image of my mother's friend who was very slim, very well dressed - often wore trousers which were, in the 1940s (whistles) oo you know! Not many people did that!
> (Interview with Denise, lines 330-337)

By exploring Denise's feelings about Annette, it became apparent that her impressions of Annette were made up of more than this association. Of Annette she said:

> I think possibly Annette with her skill with writing poetry and also her skill with imagery as well; I think she'd have to be something a little more exotic. Um…perhaps a chocolate éclair.
> (Interview with Denise, lines 292-294)

But of the friend of her mother, with whom she associated Annette, she said:

> … she would be more plain, no frills…. Of course, I didn't know it at the time but she'd got cancer, and she was pretty well dying most of the time I knew her. Well she certainly wouldn't have been a chocolate éclair; she might have been a wholemeal biscuit!
> (Interview with Denise, lines 342-343)

Her feelings about Annette were a combination of these elements:

> **Interviewer**: Annette then for you there had both the chocolate éclair quality and has associations with a wholemeal biscuit.

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Denise: Yes, yes. Yes, I think there was enough frivolity in her writing – I use that term loosely – to make me think that you know there is an aspect of her that is, that is…can be quite frothy. But she's basically a fairly down to earth person.
(Interview with Denise: lines 253-254)

During the interview I felt Denise's comments about Annette to not entirely fit together. Further, Denise also felt Annette to be 'a little distant' (Interview with Denise, line 236). Eleanor felt similarly:

… you know I just couldn't picture Annette, I found her very elusive and I think she was ... I thought she was quite cryptic in her answers
(Interview with Eleanor, lines 356-358)

Of all the participants, Annette was the one whose creative writing produced most comment for all the participants, but at the same time appeared to both Denise and Eleanor to be regarded as revealing herself least. Why was this the case? Would Denise and Eleanor have felt the same way if they had met her face-to-face? Is a lack of congruity one of the features that contributes to that sense of uncertainty that Eleanor reported? Or was this more a feature of Annette's interactions online? Annette was the only participant I interviewed face-to-face, though for all the SKYPE interviews, apart from that with Eleanor, participants had used webcams. Unlike the rest of the participants, Annette presented differently at interview from what I had anticipated – in personality and temperament and in the degree of insightfulness she showed. The interview revealed Annette to be quite critical about some of the behaviours on the course (though for the most part not of the participants on this project) – such as late submissions, lack of responsiveness in critiques, another participant taking her ideas - and about the way that the course tutor responded to these behaviours. Even though the course had finished nearly a year previously, her aggrieved feelings were strong. Neither I nor - by their accounts at interview - any of the other participants had seen this surface at all within the course. Participants had noted Annette to be elusive and quite cryptic and in her writing and critique to be perceptive and insightful, but no one had identified her as critical or of being judgemental. That I had also imagined Annette to be younger and blond (whereas all the other participants I had seen more or less matched my expectations) suggests that I had in some way – like Denise – either filled in the gaps left by Annette with my own associations or responded to some cues that I associated with someone young and blond. Jacobson (1999, in his Introduction.) draws on Walther (1996) to note 'the ways in which senders of messages optimize self-presentation and the ways in which receivers idealize senders':

From the sender's perspective, a significant feature of CMC (*Computer Mediated Communication)* is the opportunity to construct messages carefully, thereby enhancing the representation of self. From this viewpoint, the emphasis is on the meaning of the message to the sender. From the receiver's perspective, the circumstances of text-based CMC are conducive to an idealization of the sender.

From another perspective, as Annette was the only participant to be interviewed face-to-face, it might be useful to consider whether the medium of the interview affected the way that she responded, whether a different mode of interaction would have resulted in the same transaction or might have resulted in a similar presentation as online. At the time of the interview I noted how I had found myself wanting to come to the defence of the course tutor since I shared her outlook and for Annette to understand a wider perspective on events. In the light of this I mused whether we were both responding to a pre-existing relationship when I had managed the programme of creative writing courses and might have been seen to have some responsibility in what had taken place. The possibility that this previous relationship was influencing the process of the interview and perhaps made the data I wanted to collect less accessible should be taken into account. Also not to be forgotten in Denise's account of Annette is that Annette and Eleanor were the only participants on the project with whom she had not had either face-to-face or SKYPE contact.
To be able to untangle this mix of possible influences I needed to construct my subsequent research plan more closely.

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Discussion

The question of what is 'real' continues to preoccupy users of online technology and their observers. That some users are at ease within online environments (whether text based or virtual worlds) and others not (Schroeder, 2002) should not obscure that the conclusions they draw about accuracy and what is more real are fundamentally rooted not in the nature of the online environment itself but in their epistemological position. Of course, the ease of use of the technology, the orientation of users to the medium, the ability to 'suspend disbelief', the level of comfort in managing what is unfamiliar and willingness to take risks are all significant factors and may contribute to the way that we account for our experiences feeling more or less 'true'. Boler (2007) argues the case that the body functions as the 'final arbiter of truth, authenticity and meaning' (p.158), as evidenced by those who have the experience of having been 'deceived' in text based environments. Again, does this conclusion necessarily follow if we do not hold an objectivist epistemology? Might we instead interpret doubt as related to being without the familiar tools with which we contextualise our experiences and so make sense of the world? I conclude that there is more work to be carried out to explore this issue of doubt and uncertainty as well as its effect.

The epistemology that presupposes a 'way that things really are' does not regard knowledge as contingent, as shaped by and shaping its context. As such, communication is unlikely to be regarded as part of an interaction that is shaped by and shapes those communicating, more as a two-way transfer of information between separate individuals driving forward with their own separate agenda. This has implications for the way that we understand and interpret experiences online. If we consider there to be 'a way that things really are' we concern ourselves with a search for this reality; and this research into the way that relationships are mediated through text becomes a search for the way that individuals transfer information between each other through text rather than an exploration of the 'intersubjectivity' (Hutchby, 2001, p.5) that is constructed through text. From both epistemological perspectives of course, communication occurs differently online from that which takes place face-to-face: for one, the process of transferring information is altered, for the other the process of 'reciprocal mutual influence' is changed, (Beebe and Lachman in Stolorow and Atwood, (1992), p. 3). Just what this alteration, this change is about is a key question.

I would regard an essential skill of a prose writer or poet to be about the way that they stimulate and guide the reader in making meaning from what has been written. This is as much about what isn't written as what is. A skilled writer gently guides the imagination of the reader who is 'made to supply what is meant from what is not said' (Iser, 1978, p.168)

> … as the reader's imagination animates these 'outlines', they in turn will influence the effect of the written part of the text. Thus begins a whole dynamic process: the written text imposes certain limits on its unwritten implications […] but at the same time these implications, worked out by the reader's imagination, set the given situation against a background which endows it with far greater significance than it might have seemed to possess on its own.' (Iser, (1974), pp 275 & 276)

Of course, within the online environment the participants have the capacity to communicate with each other – the process of developing creative writing skills is in part about understanding the effect that words have on their readers, understanding that every reader reads differently. The more responses, the better can be the understanding of effect, and the better the understanding of the way the space between writer and reader is being used. In the same way, informal conversations around the creative writing afford opportunity to 'read' and 're-read' each other, too – arguably, a relationship is characterised by the nature of the space between people, and how this space is straddled, filled, negotiated by 'reciprocal mutual influence' (Beebe and Lachman in Stolorow and Atwood, (1992), p. 3). Barbatsis, Fegan, & Hansen, (1999) describe the space between reader and writer as being like the interior of a room. What the reader will bring into that liminal space (Iser, 2000) will be a response to what is not there as well as what is; 'what is missing…the gaps, this is what stimulates the reader into filling the blanks with projections' (Iser, 1978, p.168).

Implications for online course design

The line of inquiry that leads towards participant insights into their own internal worlds and enables them to reflect on their interpretations and responses within the course environment is of value in itself, not least because it is the very thing that needs to be done to develop their creative writing. To add to the understanding of text-based online environments, however, a different approach is more useful. For this we should turn to exploring the nature of intersubjectivity within that environment: how do the interactions afforded by the environment affect the construction of intersubjectivity?

What are the cues within the online environment that serve to conjure the imagination, and what serves to limit it? Does the asynchronous text based environment that allows scope for reflection and 'the opportunity to construct messages carefully' (Jacobson, 1999) allow participants to present an idealised self? And if so, does this have any effect on the learning process of self or others?

There is a general sense within creative writing programmes that establishing relationships with peers enables a better process for peer critique and writing development: it promotes a sense of trust and belonging and so a greater willingness to take risks in one's writing. It is arguable, however, that the more familiar one becomes with a writer and their intentions the less able one is to give them constructive feedback on the way they are guiding the reader in the liminal space between you. The reader may import her/his projections into the space that are based on prior knowledge and interpretation of the writer's intentions rather than in response to the space itself. The question then is whether the benefit of developed peer relations outweighs the drawbacks of this possibility.

Given the themes of creative writing which cut across this study in different ways, can the study of Literary Theory or of the techniques in creative writing help us understand the process by which our relationships are shaped? Pursuing the line of inquiry that looks for an understanding of the nature and development of intersubjectivity might ultimately identify alternative approaches to course design with positive effect on participants' understanding of the reader-writer relationship and so perhaps to insights in their creative writing.

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