

In Search of Light

'This is just what we need': finding inspiration at Nottingham Contemporary

Each year, the PGCE English trainees at Nottingham Trent University visit Nottingham Contemporary – Nottingham's nationally acclaimed contemporary art gallery – to find inspiration for creative practice in English. This year, because of the pandemic, the visit happened online.

Aisling Walters, the PGCE English leader, explores the benefits of such creative work, especially at such a difficult time, offers examples of the trainees' writing, and explains how the virtual gallery trip was set up, how trainees reacted to it, and how the online environment had benefits as well as disadvantages.

This article describes an online learning experience where Nottingham Trent University's PGCE English trainees accessed Nottingham Contemporary's Virtual Reality art gallery and completed two creative writing workshops delivered by associate artists on MS Teams.

Nottingham Contemporary is an art gallery in the centre of Nottingham. It has hosted over 50 international art exhibitions, delivers a variety of learning programmes and works with primary and secondary age children, encouraging them to explore, discuss and think about art. The Nottingham Trent University English PGCE course includes a visit to the gallery, last year exploring *Still Undead: Popular Culture in Britain Beyond the Bauhaus*, and the year before, the glorious *Still I Rise: Feminisms, Gender, Resistance, Act 1*.

The aims of the partnership are for the trainees to explore the gallery and the artwork, to practise their own creative writing and to use the spaces and the resources to develop their own understanding of how art can inspire their students' writing and vice versa. Fitzgerald, Smith and Monk suggest that *'students' creative writing can be stimulated and supported through learning in a creative, multisensory context within a community of peers in which risk taking is encouraged and supported in a safe and supported environment... taking advantage of opportunities for out-of-classroom learning can stimulate creative writing'* (2012, 67).

The English PGCE trainees visit Nottingham Contemporary in January, the cruellest month on a PGCE. The uncertainty of starting in a new placement, the miserable weather and the feeling that the days of the month quietly multiply make it far longer than necessary. Many years ago, in the midst of my own teaching training year, my housemate declared that all of the above, (plus the early mornings and late nights) meant we were 'living in darkness'. In January, the trainees go to Nottingham Contemporary in search of light.

In search of light during lockdown

Our visit begins with an artist-led tour of the gallery. Key artworks from the exhibition are chosen in advance as springboards for creative writing exercises; these are modelled by a writer and the trainees use the techniques themselves, sharing their thoughts and responses throughout. We discuss how some students struggle with writing, where they get 'stuck' and explore strategies to

help them to overcome these. As part of their visit, the trainees usually observe a school group working in the galleries with Associate Artists.

This year, Covid complicated things. The twenty PGCE trainees were still teaching (in a myriad of forms – in person, online, creating pre-recorded lessons and resources). Several were also home schooling their children, they had assignments to write, and I was conscious of their well-being: the usual challenges of January, plus a global pandemic. I wanted the session to support them and their well-being, not create additional strain.

In our planning meeting, Amanda Sprypt (Head of Learning), Wingshan Smith (Secondary Schools & Youth Programmer), writer Peter Rumney (Learning Team Associate Artist) and I discussed the possibilities of moving the visit online. Nottingham Contemporary's Virtual Reality gallery experience (<https://www.nottinghamcontemporary.org/record/virtually-visit-us/>) allows visitors to experience the gallery in virtual reality, swooping in from a doll's house overview to individual galleries, using a keyboard to navigate and focus on individual pieces of art.

Given that the VR experience would mean a lot of screen time, we chose to deliver two half day sessions online, a week apart, to be flexible with breaks and to open each session with breathing exercises and a meditation, around ten minutes long. The first session would focus on observation, questioning and story, the second on writing.

The first session: Grace Before Jones and Jimmy Robert: Akimbo

<https://www.nottinghamcontemporary.org/record/vr-exhibitions-grace-before-jones-and-jimmi-robert-akimbo/>

We used MS Teams to deliver both online sessions. Peter and Wingshan shared their screens and the trainees used the chat or microphone functions to participate. After opening with a meditation, Wingshan then led the group through the VR gallery for *Grace before Jones and Jimmy Robert: Akimbo*. The French artist Jimmy Robert was born in Guadeloupe, grew up in Paris and now lives in Berlin. Robert's uses his body in filmed performances, photographs and other mixed media artworks. He explores ideas about visibility and invisibility for black and LGBT people and how what you do with your body can become a political act. The title *Akimbo*, meaning 'with hands on hips', refers to a posture of defiance, or attitude of resistance.

Three artworks had been chosen as possible prompts for story-writing: Robert's 2013 work 'Untitled Ompdrailles', is a large black and white photo hanging from a wooden beam fixed at right angles to the wall. The photo shows a monument depicting a scene from Leon Cladel's novel, *Ompdrailles, Le Tombeau des Lutteurs*, (The Tomb of the Wrestlers). In the sculpture Ompdrailles' trainer (and admirer) carries away his dead body after a match. Robert can also be seen in this photo. He is lying on the plinth on which the monument stands. The trainees commented on how Robert's interaction with a public monument was particularly relevant, given recent discussions about historical representation. We also focused on an image of Andy Warhol and a fur coat belonging to Jones draped over a chair in the corner of a room (*is this luxury or exploitation? How did the owner feel in this coat? Why have they left it behind?*).

After a break, we moved onto a creative exercise focused on question formation. Paired up, the trainees had to choose an art-work from the exhibition and describe it to their partner, who could not see it, but had to draw it. When asked to reflect on this experience, some trainees described the sense of frustration at receiving too many instructions about what they were to draw, others

commented on the need for thinking time, and several commented on how the exercise had made them think about their question formation.

In the plenary, we asked for reflections and feedback on the morning. Several comments focused on the questioning and drawing activity. One trainee wrote:

Writers are artists, creating a picture in the mind using words, and for me looking at some of these works of art as a way to visually stimulate students to write creatively is an amazing way to help them find their own voice. Especially in current situations where many of them are stuck at home. The virtual gallery is a way to escape into a new creative landscape. (Geraldine Doyle)

The second session: Still I Rise: Feminisms, Gender, Resistance, Act 1

<https://www.nottinghamcontemporary.org/record/still-i-rise-in-virtual-reality/>

The second session was designed to be a practical one, with opportunities for the trainees to take part in writing activities themselves. After opening with a meditation, we joined Wingshan for a tour of the 'Still I Rise: Feminisms, Gender, Resistance Act 1' exhibition. As before, Peter and Wingshan focused on several key artworks as prompts for practical work. First, Guo Fengyi's automatic drawing. Guo Fengyi, a Chinese-born, self-taught artist, used qi gong, a spiritual practice using meditation and breathing to alleviate the pain of her arthritis. She believed that this healing practice produced visions, which she captured on paper.

Peter asked the trainees to draw with their eyes closed, and then to work their ideas into an image, inspired by Fengyi's practice. Trainees used the Chat function to share their thoughts about the experience of not knowing what they were creating. Peter asked if anyone had experienced fear during the process. Several responses suggested that this process had been cathartic:

I experienced fear and worry, I felt some feelings coming to the surface that have been causing me some anxiety for a while

I drew a rose that ended up being full of petals, and wrote about how reassuring it was to have the petals embrace the flower.

Text portrait

The second activity focused on creating a character. Developing the automatic drawing, the trainees were encouraged to think of a person who related to their image in some way and to create a 'text portrait' of them. Peter modelled by sharing a series of images of the process on PowerPoint slides. Beginning with a pencil image of an oval, then gradually adding the basic features of a face to the shape, the trainees were asked to copy this outline at home. Peter then asked trainees for additional details, freely drawn, and without worrying about representational 'accuracy'. By the ears, what could their character hear? By the eyes, what could they see? Smells, tastes, thoughts and fears were gradually added on until the face was surrounded by text. Peter also shared a word grid with the group, with headings asking: Who is this person? Where might they be? What are they thinking? What's happening? What can you see, hear, smell, touch, taste? Any thoughts or feelings, words spoken? Key words and phrases were then lifted from this:

*Today, she awoke to white paths adorned with footprints.
To joyous screams vacating snow-smushed mouths*

*and to geometric snowflakes making nests in wet eyelashes,
dusting the rooves of houses,
inspiring her to flee protective walls,
to go outside
to gawp at the beauty of it
dance in it,
cry in it,
extract hope from it
to allow herself to be momentarily freed by her inner child whose wrists are too small to hold
shackles.*

(Kirsty Sanders)

Writing backwards and causality: And / Why / Because...

Peter started this session by sharing his experiences of supporting young writers who get 'stuck' with their work. In order to explore ways through this challenge, he shared an image of a forest, and asked the trainees to use the chat function to write ideas for his story, which began: 'a girl walked into a wood *and*'. Long lists of actions followed. Peter then asked the trainees to write again, only this time, varying the sentence starter, 'a girl ran into a wood *because*'... By looking at causality rather than action the stories moved backwards, creating deeper characters and more interesting narratives. The chat function on Teams worked very well for both activities, not only did several ideas come through at once, suggesting that the group were engaged and involved, it was clear that the trainees were reading each other's responses and building on them.

A girl walked into a wood and...

Left a gift under a tree

and tripped

began running

froze

put a hammock up

followed the gingerbread trail

stole the gift next to it

hid to see who picked it up

Image-based writing

<https://www.pamelasinghphotography.com/>

The final task presented an opportunity to weave the threads from the previous writing into a cohesive whole. Peter focused on Pamela Singh's photographs of Chipko Tree Hugger women from the Himalayas, a black and white image of two pairs of hands around a tree trunk. Using this image, the original automatic drawing or their text portrait as a stimulus, the trainees were asked to start

by writing the final line of their story and then work backwards from there, always asking 'why' each line had happened in the narrative, to develop causality and detail. Several shared their final pieces in the chat:

A shrill ringing echoed through the darkness, offering a call of hope like an outstretched hand to a spent swimmer. He was no longer alone. (Cally Lambert)

Two inches to the right of his boot stood a small sapling, not noticed by anyone. (George Vadakkel)

Feedback and reflections

Feedback for the online session was gathered in Padlet. The majority of the trainees said that they intended to use the strategies and tools from the sessions. Several said that they enjoyed the experience of a gallery, even in Virtual Reality, with others thinking about the impact on their practice: *'It was interesting to think about how these art projects can be brought into the classroom'*.

Meditation was something that many trainees appreciated and several said that they would use afterwards, on both a personal and professional level: *'I have experimented with meditation before, but I am going to make it a regular feature of my teaching and see what effect it has over a period of time if I do it every week'*.

In response to a question about the feelings they experienced in the session, the overwhelming majority were positive: *'It was very calming, especially in these chaotic times!', 'I felt really calmed by the meditation, I absolutely loved it!', 'Creative, positive and relaxed', 'Creative, relaxed and challenged' and 'Calmed, creative'*.

At several points, the trainees were reminded that they were under no obligation to share their work, especially if they were uncomfortable with any thoughts coming to the surface during the session. This was something that came up in the feedback: *'I really enjoyed drawing a character, it allowed me to figure out some feelings which I was not entirely aware that I was feeling', 'Some of the exercises highlighted just how stressed I was about everything else going on at the moment'*.

During the sessions, several trainees reflected on how it felt to be in their students' shoes when faced with a request to share their writing, and how much they valued being able to choose not to. It was also interesting to note that they were far more reticent to share their drawings, possibly due to a lack of confidence in the medium, as opposed to writing. This reluctance to share was also mentioned in regard to developing practice. One feedback question asked what their next steps would be. One trainee wrote: *'[I want to...] look at ways to overcome student confidence issues in sharing things'*. Another said that they would: *'try to uncover methods to reduce the anxiety around sharing work and to apply these in a classroom'*.

Final thoughts: 'this is just what we need.'

While I believe that everyone involved would have preferred a live visit to Nottingham Contemporary, there were some unexpected positive outcomes.

The informal nature of the chat function was utilised throughout both sessions; my favourite piece of feedback came midway through the gallery tour in the first session, when one trainee wrote: *'not a question, but this is so brilliant'* adding *'this is just what we need'*.

In previous years, groups have walked down the stairs from the Contemporary to the classroom space still furiously redrafting, worried about crafting something perfect before letting others hear it. The use of the chat space meant that trainees could quickly read and respond to each other's work during the drafting process. The emoji options meant that they could 'like' or 'love' each other's writing, providing validation and positive feedback. Dymoke and McGuinn have also commented on the possibilities of creative writing and real time editing in digital contexts, (Dymoke and McGuinn, 2021). Even though the chat function was public, I feel that the transitory nature of that space may have proved comforting; more trainees shared their work than previous cohorts have.

Inevitably, the long fingers of Covid touched much of our writing. In the 'and/ why/ because' activity, the trainees developed a story in the chat. One trainee referred to a 'deadly disease', another then followed the comment up with 'Coronavirus'. Others added laughing emojis to this interaction in the chat.

[A girl walked into a wood because]

Because the prophecy had told her to

Because she wanted to feel at peace

Because there was a deadly disease

Coronavirus

There are suggestions throughout the writing that something cathartic was happening. Themes of dislocation and loss, the human need for contact came out repeatedly. I wrote in the sessions too, and shared my writing with the group, wanting to model the engagement I expected from the trainees. In the text portrait I drew an older man, the leader of a village. Rereading it, I think my own anxieties are apparent:

They know that I can't keep them safe, he thought.

The land was starving. A wet autumn and a hollow winter. The stores exhausted, the ground stubborn. Frozen land yielded nothing, refusing the marks of tools, feet and pleas.

Mutters of dissent followed him as he walked through the settlement now. He knew that the people longed for change, for movement, for anything that would alter the sameness of days but his guidance remained the same. Stand firm, be patient, wait for it to pass.

In the final pieces, there were images that could suggest hope, the 'small sapling', the outstretched hand. The chat function means that it is possible to go back through the writing and look at where some pieces started and ended. One begins:

He reached cautiously to touch his hat. He could feel white heat pulsating underneath, metallic copper tang on his tongue. Could anyone else see this? Stinging eyes produced cleansing tracks down his cheeks. Shoulders crunched, jaw locked. How could he tell his Mother without frightening her?

... and ends:

They held hands. The dying embers falling into the lake like fluorescent flames, flickering and fading.
(Geraldine Doyle).

In a recent article about the impact of Covid 19 on teacher training, Ellis *et al.* refer to innovations in ITE practice as a result of the pandemic (Ellis, Steadman and Mao, 2020). While I hope that next January our PGCE cohort can visit Nottingham Contemporary in person, this experience has prompted reflection on the structure and delivery of the sessions. In particular, I would like to look at ways of capturing the *process* of drafting during the workshops, rather than sharing a more polished piece at the very end.

At the beginning of this article, I wrote that, in a 'normal' year we go to Nottingham Contemporary in search of light. I do feel that the online experience made things lighter for the trainees. Perhaps not in the way we originally anticipated: more in the way of setting aside a burden.

References

Ellis, V., Steadman, S., and Mao, Q., (2020) 'Come to a screeching halt': Can change in teacher education during the COVID-19 pandemic be seen as innovation?, *European Journal of Teacher Education*, 43:4, 559-572

Dymoke, S. and McGuinn, N. (in press 2021) Being allowed: negotiating space for poetry writing with Literature examination students. *New Writing: The International Journal for the Practice and Theory of Creative Writing*.

Fitzgerald, B., L. and Monk, J. (2012) Celebrating creativity collaboratively: inspiring PGCE English trainees to teach creative writing, *English in Education*, Vol.46 No.1