The Dance of Critical Thinking and Creative Writing:

Our teaching is grounded in the close study of texts but which reaches out to larger political and social questions.

SLIDE ONE We’d like to thank you all for coming to share with us today, a little about our ways we bring together the critical and the creative in our MA programme and we’d really like to thank The NAWE for this amazing online conference – I have so loved the sessions I have attended so far. I listened to Francis Gilbert speaking earlier about having a growth mindset for online teaching and presenting – and that is definitely where I am – learning all the time - So heading hopefully into our online discussion (and braving a power point at the same time) - Today we’d like to talk about the ways we have written and designed and teach, an MA in Creative and Critical Writing at the University of Suffolk.

The MA has one core module that we share/co-teach? This is the Creative and Critical Writing Workshop. In our teaching, we use the same creative writing workshop model for teaching both critical theory and creative writing. Furthermore, we have created a hybrid curriculum where the subject matter of our classes are explicitly connected, entangled and celebrated.

We hope to show you today how this approach allows us to explore not only the processes of critical and creative thought but also the overlaps and the multiple ways in which the two can inform each other in the production of texts. We believe that all writing is creative and critical and in our teaching we see these overlaps and connections as ‘performative’ like a dance, taking place in the process of writing itself, always new and to a certain extent unpredictable.

SLIDE TWO We believe that the writer and their writing practice are so connected to both critical and creative understandings that each becomes, ‘a certain step of the dance’ as Derrida says (putting their dialogue into play, leaving behind their traditional separation in academia and allowing the creative and the critical to perform their dance). In which case, to borrow from Yeats, ‘how can we know the dancer from the dance?’

**Introducing ourselves**: our own practice as writers and readers, and how this influences the way we teach (the personal in academia!). What we have learnt from observing each other’s academic practice and the impact of our approach on students.

SLIDE Three

I am a novelist and lecturer in creative writing. My own practice as a writer informs my teaching. I position my creative practice in the world through a critical lens. This means I consider my writing practice as positioning me as both the dancer and the dance. It feels obvious to say that all writing, is creative *and* critical in its process. My experience in teaching in academia, however, suggests that in many ways, the critical and the creative are still seen as separate. Academic writing, professional writing and creative writing are taught as separate subjects with separate identities. And it is this that we wish to challenge in our approaches to the MA.

SLIDE FOUR I’m an academic who is interested in critical thinking that gives a deeper understanding of reality, and at the same time dares to *imagine* other potential realities. I think that the creative imagination is essential to critical thought because it allows the development of alternative visions and methodologies, which in turn can foster personal and social transformations. I see the dialogue between the creative and the critical particularly in contemporary literature, which is theoretically engaged, and wrestles with the same issues posed by critical theory. This dialogue is also crucial for a renewal of academic practice in HE and to engage staff and students in what Rosi Braidotti calls an ‘ethically transformative enquiry’ (Braidotti, 2019, p. 133) that we are seeking to implement in our practice.

SLIDE FIVE

I have been particularly alive to the ways in which Antonella’s critical theory workshop benefits the students’ creative writing outputs. I have encouraged students to approach our creative writing workshops in ways which embrace critical thought as a creative tool, and I have found that this approach allows student writers to value the socio-political, historical and cultural relevance of their own writing voices in the world.

Working alongside Amanda and observing the way she engages students in the creative writing workshop, opening up a space for personal *and* academic development thorough the students’ dialogue and collaboration, has made me rethink not only the way I teach critical theory, but also how I conceive my subject. The critical contradictions, ambiguities and complexities that make my subject interesting are now both ‘topics’ of class discussions (objects to investigate together) and ‘movements’ through which students are encouraged to re-interpret or re-invent critical terminology and tropes, and in this way they can also generate new meanings and hybrid methodologies.

Antonella and I decided to teach our classes through shared subject matter. For example, we both teach themes – these include, the monster, movement, violence, and motherhood among others. Our workshops run through the term, in alternate weeks. One week the students attend the critical writing workshop and then next they attend the creative writing workshop. We teach the same themes in both. We will show you today, an example of the ways we both teach the theme of motherhood in our classes.

We have found that fostering the students’ ability to experiment with different modes of expression and narrative configurations in both workshops, and encouraging them to reflect on the relationship between their creative work and critical thinking we can come closer to celebrating both the dance and the dancer. We believe that creating explicit links between our creative and critical workshops we are making better writers across the curriculum.

I will outline the Workshop method here and then Antonella will talk about teaching critical theory on Motherhood as a theme.

SLIDE SIX

We use the creative writing workshop as a collaborative teaching method for all our teaching. Briefly, the writing workshop is primarily about *works in progress*. Students learn about writing through workshopping, through close reading, discussion, critique and redrafting. The creative writing workshop values learning as a state of becoming. It is about experiment, creative connections, and reflection. We both use group writing exercises and group critique. we teach writing as becoming, connecting thought to lived experience, storyworlds, collaboration and empathetic understanding. In this way, our classes are creative and exploratory in spirit and connected to the emotional and personal social capital of the student. If we consider writing (and learning) as a place of *becoming*, and as a process of connecting thought and lived experience, then the relationship between critical thought and creative approaches to writing, becomes indivisible.

**SLIDE SEVEN**

**Motherhood example**: In the exploration of motherhood in my workshops we move from traditional critical perspectives on motherhood to imaginative, interdisciplinary approaches to the theme, which open up creative ways of combining autobiographical writing, fictional representations, and critical exploration of motherhood and mothering. So, the critical approach to motherhood starts with an examination of Jacqueline Rose’s *Mothers: An Essay of Love and Cruelty*. We look at it as an example of ‘critique’ of the patriarchal construction of motherhood, which eclectically engages with theory, literature, policies and life stories past and present. We then think of how mothering exceeds the engagement with the institution of motherhood and we start to weave different narratives and configurations for mothers in posthuman times, with the application of and inspiration from posthumanist concepts such as ‘entanglements’, ‘tentacularity’, ‘symbiosis’, ‘vulnerability’ and ‘worlding’. This allows the students to draft re-inventions of mothering that move between critical, literary, scientific, and artistic discourses and experiences. This allows them to ‘articulate new thoughts in language’ and at the same time identify a ‘gap in the scholarship’ that they try to address by generating new meanings and experimenting with hybrid methodologies.

SLIDE EIGHT

I teach motherhood as a subject from the writer’s perspective, explicitly linking to Antonella’s taught critical perspectives. We welcome the critical theories that Antonella teaches, into our classes. I begin by asking how, as writers, we articulate motherhood in all its complexities. The writer Avni Doshi says, ‘motherhood is such a large, expansive word, it almost means nothing at all. Adrienne Riche said that ‘we know more about the air we breathe, the seas we travel, than about the nature and meaning of motherhood.’

I pose these ideas to the students and ask them to think about how the critical perspectives on motherhood they have read about might inform their own emotional and imaginative approaches to writing versions of motherhood – also how their own writing practice might be seen within this theme.

The students write a flow of words that come to them imaginatively on the subject of and they let their learning in Antonella’s class flow within their creative responses.

We then share these words. This in itself, provokes further discussions, new perceptions and creative possibilities.

Then the students are asked to write freely on the word *motherhood*. The only rule to the exercise is that they must include some of the shared words. The trajectory their writing takes will be both critical and creative and regardless of the ways in which they write, **their concern is to articulate new thoughts in language**. The group sharing its keys words becomes a centre of gravity for the thinking and writing that occurs. Here, through our creative writing workshop, there is to quote Deleuze, new language within language. (Deleuze, 1998: 5)

In this way, our writing is a shared fusion of critical thought, narrative craft and storytelling skills.

ANTONELLA

My critical writing workshops engage in a dialogue with Amanda’s creative writing workshops by translating the creation of these ‘storyworlds’ into the critical enquiry of socio-political and psychic worlds. In class we move from the investigation of critical and theoretical texts (for instance, the dialogue Rose’s *mothers*, Butler’s *safeguarding* and Braidotti’s *inexhaustible*) and engage in a discussion where students bring their ‘modes of knowledge’ and start to unfold them, reconsider the ‘terms’ of their intellectual approaches (re-configuring both their language and the limits of their terminology) and create new interpretative narratives out of their exchanges and interactions. In this way, collaborative thinking ‘creates’ alternative methodologies and visions of reality.

AMANDA

This approach often leads to a sense of awareness between autobiographical writing fictional representations and explorations of motherhood. Within this process of a text in a state of becoming, is a writer emerging through their understandings of both the craft of narrative and writing and the critical and emotional thought that underpins this.

Discussions arise on these overlaps. We ask how we fictionalise a storyworld. How do we write from experience and beyond experience? We consider again the critical perspective the students have worked on how their creative responses might feed back into their work into. What we aim for is a flow between the critical and the creative which is led by the students. This notion of collaborative exploration is crucial to the ways in which using the creative writing workshop as a teaching model has the possibility of being such a potentially useful structure for teaching across disciplines.

SLIDE TEN

As a further exercise in this class, we ask students to produce motherboards – collages of ideas and thoughts articulated in different mediums.

Slide eleven

**SLIDE TWELVE**

**student motherboard**: this is an example of student work that reflects the movement from the traditional (academic) critical approaches to motherhood to imaginative re-inventions of mothering that are opened up by the dance between the critical and the creative. The student here brings a new medium into their critical thinking, creatively engaging with the limits of eco-maternalism and the problematic association of caring and motherhood based upon the Mother Earth trope. As you can see, their response transforms the critical terminology into one of the dimensions of mothering as ‘tentacular’, ‘entanglements’, and ‘vulnerability’ become an expansion of the artistic articulation of the material, social, racial, and ecological expression of mothering.

SLIDE THIRTEEN

This is a student’s work from the creative writing workshop motherhood – it is weaving storyworlds, life experience and critical understanding. Comment on the textuality and the intertextuality

So this movement – this way of bringing critical thought to our writing, and creative approaches to critical thought, is also noted by the students in their journals – this is a place where students map their understanding of their own writing practices – and their own understanding of critical thought and creative writing and how their own writing is *becoming*.

We will finish with a short reading of a student story:

One of our students wrote a contemporary retelling of the folk story of Malekin, a Changeling tale. The Gift tells the story of a childless couple who move to an old house in the country, and find themselves visited by child spirit. The Gift, she says, encapsulates Jacqueline Rose’s theoretical notion of the child as a stranger, ‘the alien in our midst.'

*The house was suddenly filled with life, as though a spirited wind had blown in through the open window and woken the dust from its corners. Even in the unloved nursery, up high in the attic where the moon shone bright through its windows. The unnerving cries of life rang through the timbers and shook the spiders from their webs.*

*She was a gift to us after our grief. Her eyes were the hue of green ferns and brought colour into our dark world. We had been left with empty arms and heavy hearts for so long that we hardly believed she was real. She filled the world with unknowing and made bewildered pioneers of us both. Each day there was a new riddle to solve, and a new curiousness to unravel.  (Caroline Roberts MA student 2022 University of Suffolk)*

ANTONELLA

We hope to have shown how our work together within the creative writing workshop model, offers new ways of learning and developing as a writer. By discussing the relationships between the critical and the creative together we have also found new ways of approaching curriculum and teaching and learning and suggest that by articulating the ways we find or don’t find connections between academic writing and creative writing, we progress ourselves, as writers and thinkers.