Towards a More Cogent Curriculum for Experimental Writing: A Case Study

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Abstract

There is an increasing need for better curriculum and pedagogical support for teaching creative writing (Swander, Leahy and Cantrell, 2007), and more so, its subgenre, experimental writing. Using the Research Skill Development (RSD; Willison and O'Regan, 2007) framework, the curriculum document for a third-year varsity unit on experimental writing was mapped out to locate the different facets of the writing process. The exploration yielded these findings: (1) a lack of explicitly stated creative skills; and (2) an inclination towards a more serious and academic tone and mood, lacking in experimentation and risk-taking. Changes to the curriculum document hinged on (1) the number of assessment tasks; (2) the kind of assessment tasks; and (3) the rubric descriptors. The changes seemed to impact the classroom, resulting in more student engagement, and to inform another teaching and learning model for experimental writing.

Background

Is there a creative writing pedagogy, an art and practice of teaching creative writing? More so, is there one for its subgenre, experimental writing? This was the question that confronted me (Timothy) when I was first handed the responsibility of teaching a third-year experimental writing unit.

The unit had been taught for a decade, as a result of which the Unit Guide (curriculum document) seemed outdated. On paper, it showed two formative assessments and one summative assessment, but little of the learning process as indicated in its weekly lesson plans. Its rubric also seemed weighed down by multiple categories to assess for each task.

Therefore, in my first attempt to teach the course last year, I cut down some requirements for the formative assessments, and tweaked the rubrics considerably to lighter and more manageable categories for every

task. I also added a few multiple-choice question (MCQ) quizzes, and some revisions to the lesson plans to reflect what was stated in the rubrics. However, I concocted the amendments without stepping into the class, and so the modifications stood on untested grounds.

After the first semester of teaching the unit, there seemed to be something amiss despite positive student evaluation. Consulting the Learning Skills advisers (including Esmael Yahya) brought forth the first-fruits of teasing out the facets of curriculum using the Research Skill Development (RSD) framework.

Research Skill Development (RSD) Framework

Developed by researchers at the University of Adelaide (Willison and O'Regan, 2007), the RSD framework as a conceptual model is good for mapping academic curricula to research skills (e.g., information literacy, academic writing, critical thinking; Willison and O'Regan, 2007). The framework also seems to work for creative writing (Woods, 2009), as the process of writing creatively might be akin to the research process (Brien, 2005). Iamarino (2015) rightly perceives that "pursuits of creative writing are borne by an organic desire for knowing and expressing" (p. 1124), which are fundamental to the research process.

On the vertical axis, the RSD framework states the six facets of the research process: (1) to embark on an inquiry, and clarify understanding; (2) to find and generate knowledge using an appropriate methodology; (3) to critically evaluate this knowledge and the process of generation thus far; (4) to organise the collected or generated knowledge; (5) to synthesise, analyse and apply new knowledge; and (6) to communicate the new knowledge (Willison and O'Regan, 2006).

The framework shows the five levels of autonomy on the horizontal axis, developed at a particular skill level, ranging from the lowest degree of autonomy (students pursue a closed inquiry with a considerable level of prescription and guidance), to a high level of autonomy (responding to an open inquiry with little structure and guidance; Willison and O'Regan, 2006).

Methodology

After skimming through my Unit Guide by the Learning Skills Advisors, there seemed to be one major element missing: the skills for the unit were not explicitly written out. Therefore, the Unit Guide seemed a little abstract, and that was also reflected in the assessment rubrics as well.

The creative skills were then derived from (1) exploring the writing methods delineated in *The Writing Experiment* (Smith, 2005), the text used for the Unit; and (2) the assessment output requirements. For

example, one of the creative methods listed in the book was called "Found Text", in which portions of an existing literary text were lifted and re-combined to make a new text; thus the skill included reproducing the creative strategy in a different form (Skill 12 in Table 1). In another instance, an assessment output requirement included the skill of piecing together various writing fragments to make a coherent whole (Skill 13 in Table 1).

Table 1: List of Creative Skills

1. Explore alternate, divergent, or contradictory creative strategies
2. Determine the right creative strategies to use
3. Generate the creative strategies
4. Articulate reasons for choosing alternate, divergent, or contradictory creative strategies
5. Distinguish similar or contradictory creative strategies
6. Evaluate and reflect on the creative strategies
7. Integrate alternate, divergent, or contradictory creative strategies
8. Connect the creative strategies in new ways
9. Extend the creative strategies to create new knowledge
10. Re-formulate the creative strategies towards novelty
11. Transform the creative strategies into entirely new forms
12. Reproduce the creative strategies in different forms
13. Synthesise the creative strategies in a coherent whole

After determining the creative skills outcomes, the Unit Guide, in particular the unit learning outcomes and assessment task requirements (from three major assignments and seven mini-assignments), was mapped to three major categories: (1) the Creative Skills, (2) the RSD facets, and (3) the RSD levels of autonomy. The Learning Skill Adviser (Esmael) assisted with NVivo software. Each major category was further sub-divided into an individual sub-category (see Table 2).

Table 2: Major Categories and their Sub-Categories

Major Category	1) Creative Skills	2) RSD Facets	3) RSD Autonomy Levels
Sub-Categories	(see Table 1)	1) Embark & Clarify 2) Find & Generate 3) Evaluate & Reflect 4) Organise & Manage 5) Analyse & Synthesise 6) Communicate & Apply	1) Prescribed 2) Bounded 3) Scaffolded 4) Open-ended 5) Unbounded

Thus, the learning outcomes and assessment requirements were mapped to all three categories and their relevant sub-categories. In the creative skills category and the RSD facets category, some statements were mapped to more than one relevant sub-category. For example, the learning outcome "Skills in editing … of copy for publication" was mapped to creative skill 2, 4 and 9.

Findings

Figure 1: Facet Distribution Percentage in the Unit Guide

- Embark & Clarify — 8%
- Find & Generate — 8%
- Evaluate & Reflect — 21%
- Organise & Manage — 22%
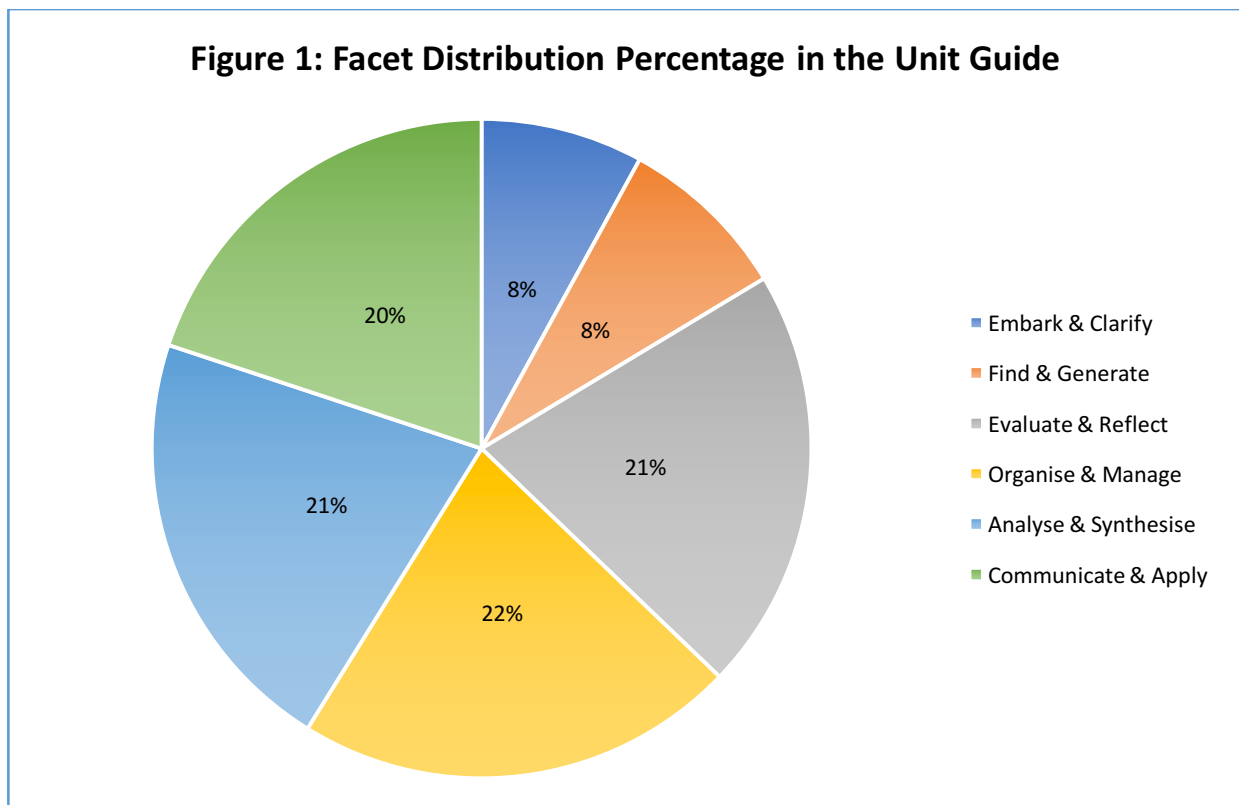- Analyse & Synthesise — 21%
- Communicate & Apply — 20%

Figure 1 shows the distribution of the facets in the Unit Guide. It can be seen that the "Embark & Clarify" and "Find & Generate" facets cover 8% respectively, comparatively less than the other facets. Of the other four facets, there seems to be an approximately equal distribution of between 20 and 22%.

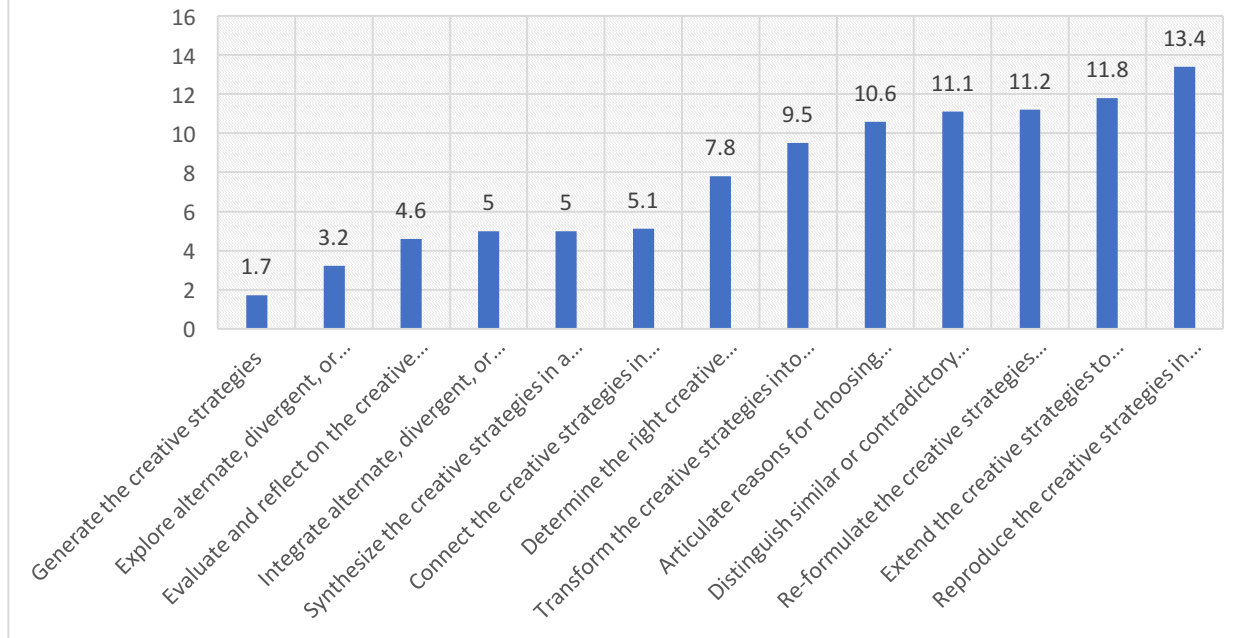**Figure 2: Creative Skill Distribution Percentage in the Unit Guide**

Figure 2 shows the percentages for the creative skill distribution. There are six skills scoring below the median of 7.8%. Of the six skills, two are far below: (1) Explore alternate, divergent, or contradictory creative strategies, at 3.8%; and (2) Generate the creative strategies, at 1.7%. These two skills also fall under the facets of "Embark & Clarify" and "Find & Generate". The skill most used is "Reproduce the creative strategies in different forms".

Figure 3: Levels of Student Autonomy in the Unit Guide

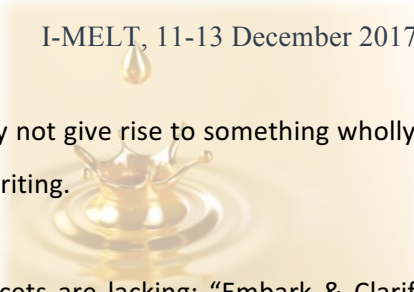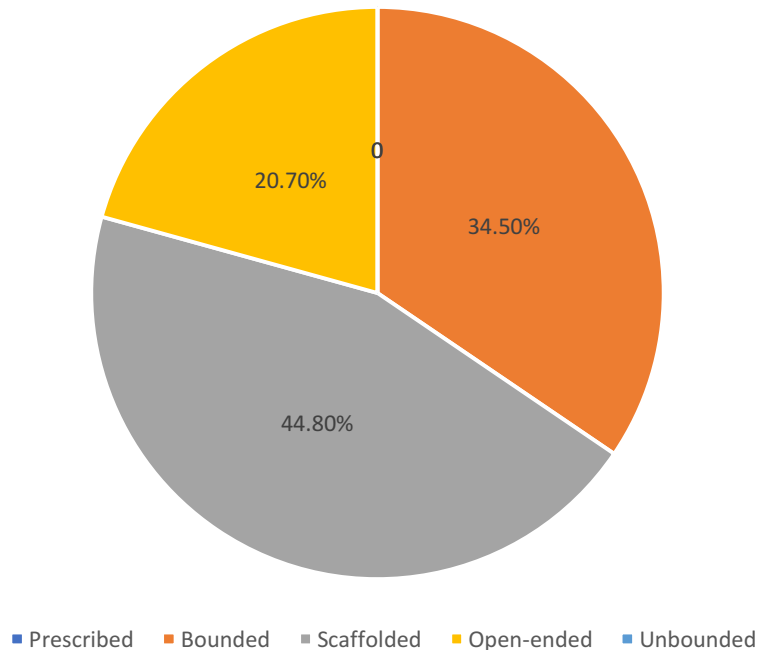Legend: Prescribed, Bounded, Scaffolded, Open-ended, Unbounded

Figure 3 illustrates the distribution of the student autonomy levels. The autonomy levels of "Prescribed Inquiry" (lowest degree of autonomy) and "Unbounded Inquiry" (highest degree of autonomy) are not used at all, while the majority of the distribution is grouped among the other three autonomy levels. This seems to show that student autonomy wavers among "Bounded inquiry" (34.5%), "Scaffolded Inquiry" (44.8%) and "Open-ended Inquiry" (20.7%). Therefore, there seems to be a continuum between boundaried and student-initiated work, with approximately 45% of it scaffolded by the educator's guidance and shaping.

Discussion

Though, for a long time, the premises of creative writing pedagogy have asserted that inspiration, and not education, drives creativity, the inclination towards more pragmatic educative measures is slowly emerging and taking a foothold in the academe (Swander, Leahy and Cantrell, 2007). Thus, I believe that foregrounding the Unit Guide with a list of achievable creative skill outcomes (see Table 1) is a necessary step to de-mystify creative writing, and more so, the experimental writing process.

The skills, reflective of the strategies the students have to master, might become a structured palette for the students to choose from, and guide them towards learning about experimentation, and also going through the process of experimentation itself. Experimental writing hinges mostly on novelty and innovation, and

though a parsed-out process may not give rise to something wholly original, it at least may make way for a different, albeit guided, way of writing.

Based on these findings, two facets are lacking: "Embark & Clarify", and "Find & Generate". These two cognitive domains are equivalent to the affective domain of "Curious" and "Determined" as stated in the RSD framework. Thus, it was no wonder that my first year of teaching seemed lacking, and the students were less adventurous and galvanized, as there was too much emphasis on the other facets, slanting the Unit towards a heavier cognitive load, and less towards playfulness, a key ingredient of experimental writing.

In addition, the skills that were covered the least (Skill 1 and 3 in Table 1), hinge on exploration and generation, while the skills that were highly covered above the median (Skill 4, 5, 9, 10, 11 and 12 in Table 1) slanted more towards cognitive problem-solving, by way of articulation, comparison, extension, reformulation, transformation, and reproduction. This perhaps added to the lack of play and motivation in the class and Unit, and created a more serious tone and mood.

Clearly the Unit Guide had downplayed the key ingredient of experimental writing, that is, playfulness, leading to innovation. And in its place, the curriculum document emphasised the more academic and cognitive skills of the writing process. This might also hamper any experimentation, which is dependent on risk-taking.

So, in order to remedy that, these are the changes made to the Unit Guide: (1) a reduction of assessment tasks; (2) a remodelling of the assessment tasks; and (3) a re-wording/phrasing of some of the rubric description to reflect creative skills.

According to Donnelly (2015), an effective outcome-based creative writing assessment needs to include (1) clear measurable elements provided in criterion-referenced rubrics, and (2) direct connection of the learning outcomes to the assessment tasks highlighted in the curriculum document.

Therefore, the mini-assignments in the form of MCQs are no longer used as an assessment instrument, but more as a learning tool with no more grades assigned. In retrospect, the MCQs do not have clear measurable elements. Grade weighting for each question was randomly assigned, and it was difficult to match learning outcomes to the task.

A mini assignment is also added to the Unit. This mini assignment assessed in the beginning of Week 3 requires students to produce a rendition of an experimental sound poetry. This sets the tone of

experimentation, and also engages the students to perform as they need to produce a 1-minute recording of a highly experimental work.

In addition to that, one of the major assignments is remodelled, and instead of a paper assignment, a vodcast is required, allowing students to be more creative and experimental in their presentation. Also, a reflective element is included into the vodcast assignment, as students are required to reflect on their learning experience and the writing process.

The wordings in the rubrics are also tweaked to reflect the creative skills being imparted and learned as seen in Table 3.

**Table 3: Rubrics Reconfigured to Reflect the Creative Skills**

Original	Re-worded
The proposed theme is strongly developed with evidence of original thought.	The proposed theme is strongly generated and articulated with evidence of original thought.
The broad range of strategies is strongly understood and applied.	The broad range of strategies is well-connected and synthesised.
The complementarity of the proposed theme and the broad range of strategies is excellent.	The proposed theme complements and integrates excellently with the broad range of strategies.
The experimental writing as a whole is strongly expressed and developed.	All the writing fragments integrate as a seamless whole, with evidence of experimentation, and thoughtful exploration.

Given such cogent changes to the curriculum document, it is hypothesised that this experimental writing unit will spring forth more interest and exploration in the student.

From classroom observation of the first six weeks of class by the Learning Skills Adviser (Esmael), there seemed to be a gravitation towards more inquiry and clarification from the students. Creative written work was enthusiastically generated in class, and a sense of purposefulness and accomplishment suffused the classroom experience, though at the beginning there seemed to be some apprehension as the experimental strategies were vastly different from what the students were used to writing. Through the discussion forum on Moodle, students reflected that they were slowly but surely gaining a foothold into experimental writing.

After six weeks of classroom teaching, a new model of teaching and learning also seemed to be emerging (Figure 4). The classroom experience seemed to predominantly involve the facets of "Embark & Clarify", "Find & Generate", and "Evaluate & Reflect", while the take-home work seemed to spark off the remaining three facets. Through the feedback of their take-home work, there seemed to be a synergy of all six facets working harmoniously through what happens inside and outside of the classroom. Nevertheless, this new model needs to be further tested and researched in more settings of the teaching and learning of experimental writing.

Figure 4: A New Model for Teaching and Learning for Experimental Writing
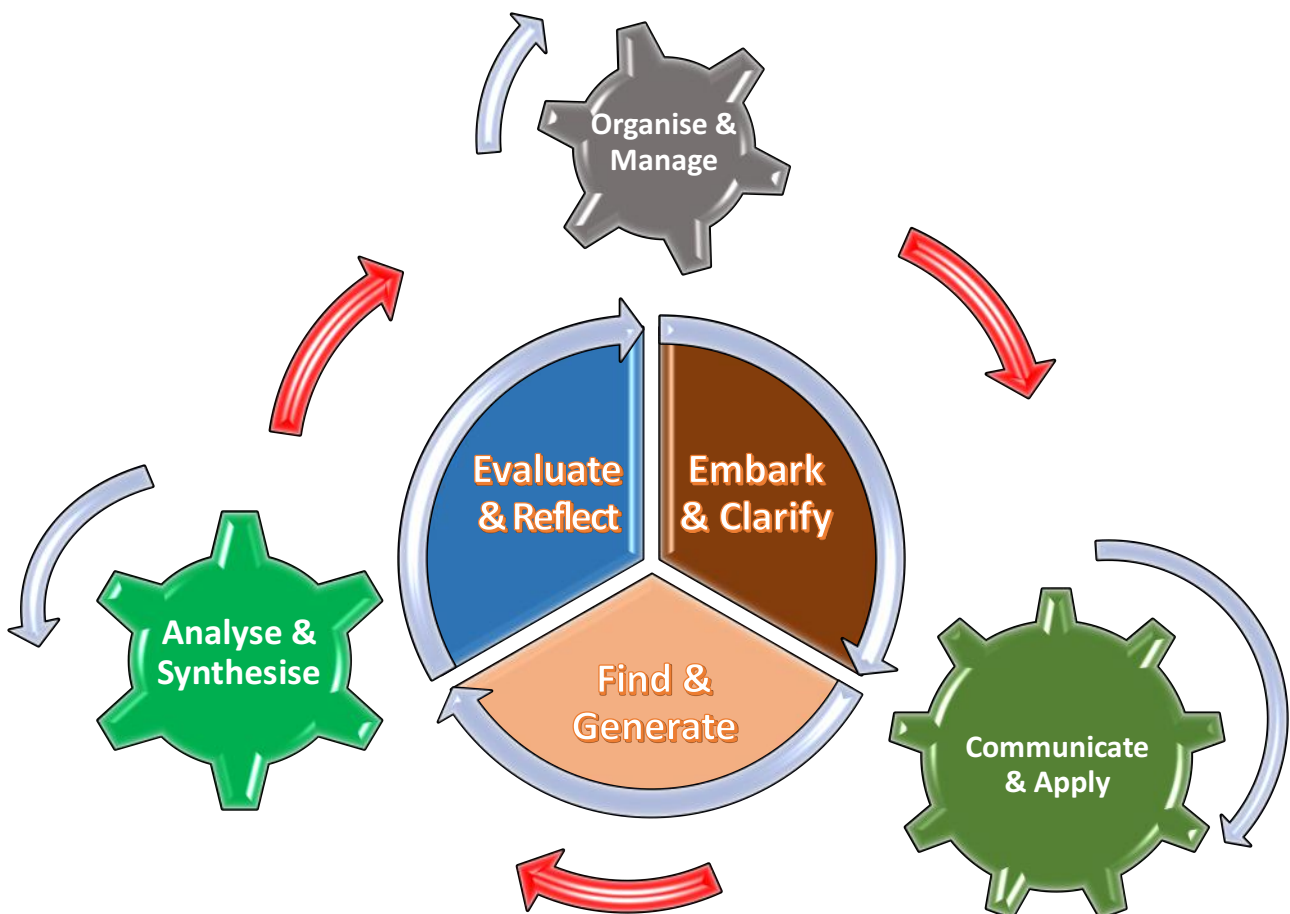
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