

Sun Yat-sen University, China

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Writing, Sharing and Growing: Creative Writing in English at a Mainland Chinese University

Abstract:

The teaching of Creative Writing in the Department of English at Sun Yat-sen University in South China has its own particular characteristics. First, to my knowledge, this is one of the very first English Creative Writing courses taught by Mainland Chinese faculty to students for whom English is a second language. Another important factor is that the Creative Writing program at Sun Yat-sen has developed not only as a writing experience, but also as a context for counselling and therapy for students. The students taking these courses write from the experience of their own lives, and the workshops that are integral to the program have provided a context where students can share the experiences they write from. Students have come to regard the program as a safe space where they can share their experiences about growing up, as well as their personal relationships with family and friends. Teaching this course over the last year has led me to believe that Creative Writing not only serves to improve students' writing ability, but may also provide an educational context that helps students share experiences, and enables them to grow as people.

Biographical note:

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Keywords:

China – creative writing – ESL – counselling – therapy

The Creative Writing program at Sun Yat-sen University, China

This paper examines the function of the Creative Writing course in the Department of English, Sun Yat-sen University in Guangzhou, China. In particular, it analyses the role that workshops play in understanding the experiences that inspire students' stories. Such a course is very new in the context of China, since traditional writing courses in English departments at Chinese universities are usually designed to teach students certain genres of professional writing such as business communication, essay writing, letter writing, report writing etc, as part of an ESL (English as Second Language) curriculum. My experience of teaching Creative Writing at Sun Yat-sen University is that this course has allowed students to write what they wish to write, which has typically concerned their experiences, personal lives, and their relationships. This has led to an increased engagement in the program that, incidentally, has also strengthened the teaching of traditional writing skills, although in a less obvious (but arguably more powerful) fashion than previously.

Although the length of the traditional university writing courses varies in different programs in different universities, such courses usually run throughout all four years of undergraduate study. Traditional courses often start by training students in writing at the sentence level for beginning students, moving towards genre-based writing for higher-level students. As a result, advanced students often graduate with a satisfactory proficiency in written English for writing business letters or traditional essays, albeit with some of those errors typically found among students of English as a foreign language.

The writing course in many departments of English in Chinese universities has undergone some changes over the last few decades, as a result of the open-door policies implemented since 1980s. Among the changes taken place has been the introduction of writing for specific purposes, such as academic writing and business English. However, English Creative Writing classes were virtually unknown until 2005, when Alex Kuo, a visiting professor from Washington State University, taught a short course in Creative Writing in Beijing Forestry University. Shortly after, from 2007 to 2009, the Australian-Chinese poet Ouyang Yu taught Creative Writing at Wuhan University. It might be noted that both Alex Kuo and Ouyang Yu are based respectively in the United States and Australia, where programs in Creative Writing are well established.

As far as I know, Creative Writing courses in the Western model were first taught by Mainland Chinese teachers in September 2009, in both Sichuan University and Sun Yat-sen University. The Creative Writing course at Sichuan University is offered for one semester to final-year English majors, while the program at Sun Yat-sen University is for English majors in their second year. None of the teachers in these two programs have hitherto been formally trained in teaching Creative Writing, but instead have come to the subject through their own interest, although teachers in Sichuan have participated in a number of workshops run by the faculty of Arizona State University. In order to understand creative writing in the Western tradition, I began my MFA in creative writing program at City University of Hong Kong in June 2010.

I have always been interested in Creative Writing, and I first became aware of the possibility of teaching Creative Writing at university level when Richard Freadman—the then Chair of English at Lingnan University in Hong Kong—and writer-in-residence Xu Xi, visited our Department in late 2008. Subsequently, I attended workshops at the University of Iowa in February 2009, Lingnan University in April 2009, and the University of Pittsburgh in February 2010.

The first Creative Writing course in Sun Yat-sen University ran for a full academic year from September 2009. Sophomores majoring in English—39 of them in total—wrote seven to eight stories of their own choice that were largely non-fiction, using their own life experiences as inspiration for their writing. The course included lectures, readings and workshops. The lectures were, and still are, about the craft of Creative Writing, based on analysis of well-written stories for students to read as writers. The stories are selected as examples of effective use of writing techniques and linguistic subtlety. The class of 39 students is divided into two groups for workshops. Two stories are critiqued in each workshop of 90 minutes. The class comments or asks questions about the story from the perspective of writing techniques and life experiences of either the writer or the reader.

The two groups meet in one class for a summary of the two workshops and an analysis of the stories written by the rest of the class, so that every one has the opportunity to know what their classmates have done. I summarize the main points of the workshops, so that students better see how the narrative techniques work in their own stories. I also quote from students' stories to illustrate what are well-structured stories, what are good titles, good openings and good endings, good use of rhetoric, good details etc. The summary also includes a section of 'striving for linguistic accuracy' in which I cite from students' stories expressions that are not quite appropriate or not so accurate for the class to work on together.

Each story is assessed by two teachers, one native speaker of English, the other Chinese (this has been changed to two native speakers of English with training in Creative Writing for the current academic semester, which started in September 2010), so that students can revise their stories with specific instructions. Peer correction is introduced in the second semester. In the meantime, the top five stories of each assignment are posted in the shared space for the class to read.

The teaching of writing and the role of the Creative Writing program

In the last two decades or so, Creative Writing programs in English speaking countries such as the United States, Britain and Australia have been growing in popularity (Harper 2006; Wandor 2008; Harper & Kroll 2008). While Harper considers creative writing as an essentially human act through which the writer 'investigates, explores, articulates and speculates' (Harper 2006: 1–7), others have valorised Creative Writing for its educational benefits, noting that such courses enable students to write better essays and dissertations (Perl & Schwartz 2006).

Since Creative Writing in China is very new¹, there have not been any previous studies of its educational and humanistic potential. Research on the teaching of

writing in China has focused mainly on the benefits of writing in improving proficiency in English as a second language. When Xiao (2007: iii) refers to ‘the art of writing’, his concern is with English as a second language, not with creativity. Zeng (2009) recognizes the links between reading and writing, and proposes methods for combining reading with the teaching of writing in the ESL classroom. Similar studies by Wang (2008), Li and Li (2008), and Shen (2008) have a similar focus on the instructional and pedagogical benefits of writing courses from an ESL perspective.

Workshops in the Western tradition, as “the backbone of any creative writing program” (Kealey 2005: 5), focus on the writing techniques of the work in question. During a workshop session, the strengths and weaknesses of a piece of work in progress are discussed and suggestions for improvement are made. Suggestions may include anything “...from the psychology of characters to narrative structure to the finer details of style and grammar” (Iversen 2004: 36). In other words, a workshop is like an editorial meeting (Kealey 2005: 114). Vanderslice (2006: 150-151) puts forward the four elements of demographic awareness, cultivating the writerly reader, developing the writerly critic, and encouraging revision as essential for an effective workshop.

The course I have established at Sun Yat-sen University is designed to combine the teaching of Creative Writing on the Western model with aspects of proficiency training in the Chinese context. It aims to integrate speaking, reading, and listening with writing by encouraging students to write about their lives, and to discuss their writing in workshops. The course aims not only to teach students the craft of creative writing but also to address linguistic issues as well. Students are encouraged to think critically by critiquing their peers’ stories in workshops, sharing their experiences and, ultimately, writing their own ‘inside stories’ for a wider English-reading audience.

The course consists of lectures, readings of selected stories, workshops, revision and peer correction. So far, students have written seven stories, most of which are creative non-fiction, as they tend to turn to their own life experiences or to things that happen around them for inspiration. The data used in the current paper are largely related to stories that are emotion-loaded, which students do not tend to share with others, especially the people they write about. Some of the stories are close to confessional writing in the Western context. In relation to such writings which include *The Kiss* (Harrison 1997), *Because I Remember Terror, Father, I Remember You* (Silverman 1999), and the magazine of *True Confession* which started in 1922, Silverman argues that such writing is painful but also gives “a profound relief” (2009: 112). Wear and Jones (2010) study the confessional writings by physicians in the last half century about their medical errors or negative feelings towards patients. They argue that such writings result in the physicians’ personal development and help them know themselves better. More scholarly account of confessional writings can be found in Gill (2006).

Although the workshops in Sun Yat-sen University were originally intended for students to critique each other’s story in terms of writing techniques and language, as the course developed, it became clear that students reacted strongly to the emotional content of the writing. In Western societies, I realise, if strong emotional issues do

emerge in Creative Writing programs, students are often referred to university counsellors, particularly when various forms of trauma are written about or discussed. However, student counselling services at Chinese universities are by no means as developed as their Western counterparts, and given the strength of the emotional responses expressed by many students in my class, I felt it entirely necessary to provide students with a degree of counselling as well as a large measure of support.

Bridging the gap: writing and workshopping the past

What students wrote² in the course generally fell into one of four categories: first, their relationships with parents, relatives, and friends; second, their high school experiences; third, love stories; and fourth, reflections on life in general. Very often, when writing about their parents, students tended to express a powerful love that they seldom expressed in their everyday lives. A female student Ting, who is quiet and prefers writing to speaking in or out of the classroom, wrote about her father whose love she had ignored for years and concluded as follows:

Maybe father is less close to you than mother; maybe father is sometimes too strict like an ancient teacher; maybe father is hard to approach and understand. But I may say that something in your fathers might be just the same as in mine: he is the one who always hands the receiver to mom when I call; he is the one who becomes most restless simply because I said I might not be able to arrive home on Mid-autumn's Day; he is the one (Ting).

Ting's acknowledgement of her father's love was the theme that found expression in the writing of many others in the writing class. A male student, Bo, who did not discuss his feelings in class, wrote about both his father and mother. In his story 'Father, My Boy', he wrote about all the undesirable facts about his father, until he found his father at a vulnerable moment:

Is this man my father? Is this vulnerable man my tyrannical, strong and arrogant father? I stood there, looking at him breathing in and breathing out and a feeling of closeness flowed right through me. It suddenly dawned on me that everything's got a reason, his tyranny, his break-out, his arrogance and his *loneliness*. Father, my boy. (Bo)

Here the writer is an adult who understands that his father is human, has weaknesses, is vulnerable and needs to be taken care of. When Bo writes about his mother, who prays to multiple gods in a form of religious insurance, he is unable to hide his resentment:

As we grow up, my mother's obsessive belief gradually become our nightmare. Not only is she a spokeswoman working for the Superstition Company and a loyal follower of Mr. Ignorance, but also a boring preacher who will not let go of any chance to impose her beliefs on us by involving us in those meaningless rituals. (Bo)

However, when Bo's younger brother engages in teenage rebellion, he himself shares his mother's concerns about his brother's wild behaviour. When his mother suggests

going to the shrine, he goes there as a sympathetic son and sees his mother's belief in a different light:

I saw her kneel down on the floor with her palms together. The smoke given off by the incenses swirled around her head almost like a holy halo. In the dim shrine, her grey hair had been hued by the light of the candles and turned into a warm color. Her eyes, enlightened with sparkles, looked up at the statue of the god with full reverence and absolute solemnity. I could hear her murmur in a low voice that echoed in the shrine, like a chant. She was praying for my brother, I know. But this time, I really hoped that the god could hear her pray and gave her some wise instructions so as to relieve her distress. (Bo)

This allowed Bo to understand his mother's prayers as more of love than superstition, as he shares his mother's love for his brother. This proves to be a turning point for his attitude toward her praying, and he reinterprets her religious zest as follows:

From then on, I don't argue with my mother about her belief any more. To me, her belief is no longer about those meaningless rituals and ridiculous yellow papers, but the prosperity of the family, the safety of her children and the well-being of everyone she knows. On her part, these are more important than any scientific discoveries. Mother's belief is about love. (Bo)

Ting and Bo are among the many students who wrote and reflected on their relationship with their parents. Of course, one can never be certain, but I do believe that this kind of writing actually lead to the improvement of such relationships. A female student named Lu wrote the story of a mother waiting for her daughter's phone call to say whether the daughter would go home for a festival. The story was written from her mother's perspective, focusing on her thoughts and anxiety while waiting. Eventually, the daughter called to say that she was not coming home. This piece was Lu's workshop story, where she wrote insightfully about the feelings of the mother:

She was upset and hurt, but she didn't appear any disappointment in her voice not even a single sigh. She collected the joy of receiving her daughter's call and transformed them into the courage of continuing the talk. She asked the questions she had prepared and reminded her 'busy' daughter of varying the diet and warned her of not watching too many videos on computer. Her daughter just kept saying 'yes, mum, I know.' 'yes, mum, I will.' and then hung up the phone to end this no more than 10-minutes phone talk. (Lu)

It is obvious that the writer understands her mother's expectations and consequent disappointment all too well. At the workshop, Lu confessed that she wrote the story because she felt guilty about not going home more often, and resolved to go home more frequently. In her reflection paper on the course, Lu noted that:

Stories about our family relationships always wake our love for the long-ignored family members... If we are good at discovering interesting and meaningful events in our lives, we can learn a lot from our own lives, from our own creative writing. (Lu)

She returns to this issue in her second reflection paper at the end of the academic year:

I should admit that sometimes writing really gives me a better chance to express myself especially when it comes to something very personal. For example, one of my story was about the most embarrassing moment in my life—a fight with a boy when I was young; and then there was a record for my VR complex—my love for an idol, an affection which nearly no one knows; and my regret for not being able to spend more time with my family, and so on... These are some delicate feelings which are very hard to say out or write down without any reason at all. But the writing class grants me the reason. (Lu)

The female student, Le, was the first one who cried in the workshop. Her workshop piece was called ‘A Letter to Star’, in which she apologized to her cousin Star, two years her junior, about the fact that she had been the one who had broken their grandma’s sewing machine seven or eight years ago. She fled from the scene, and everyone believed that Star had broken the sewing machine. Le described the scene that had stuck in her mind for all those years:

I remember you rushed out of the room, crying and yelling ‘NO! I didn’t. Why don’t you trust me?’ All I did was hide in a corner, watching things happen and dared not tell the truth. I heard grandma grieved ‘My sewing machine...’ I heard my aunt sighed, ‘What a dishonest child...’ I heard you sobbed ‘I don’t know a thing ...’ I shivered. (Le)

She recognized the damage done to grandma and to Star:

Even years after the event, grandma sometimes still mourned for her sewing machine, like a forever-lost old friend, ‘Oh, my poor sewing machine... If only you hadn’t broken it down’ You were irritated and snapped, ‘NO! Told you a million times, I DIDN’T!’ Each time her words stung your heart, so did mine. (Le)

During the workshop, Le said that she would not have the courage to tell her cousin the real story, though writing about it in English relieved her a little. When she cried in class, her classmates tried to comfort her by sharing with her their stories of guilt, which they managed to reduce after confessing to the people they had hurt. The workshop ended with Le saying that she would try to talk to her cousin. This she did, and she wrote about in her reflection paper:

My workshop experience was really impressive and things eventually turned out I have never imagined before. One of my classmates had the similar experience and she sent me her writing after the workshop. She said I was brave to bring it to the public, which she couldn’t do. And she advised that she and I should work on these matters together because we both owe someone an apology. Struggled for days, I did send my writing to my cousin through e-mail. I can’t believe I did it! It was a break for me. Without writing, I may hide this as a secret forever. I did it! (Le)

A male student, Hang, one of the best writers in the class, resorted to writing when his girlfriend broke up with him at the beginning of the Creative Writing class. For several days, he wrote diaries in order to find an outlet for his misery. In one of the pieces called ‘Broken Heart’, he gave a detailed account of his sadness:

I just felt sad, very sad, deeply sad ... sadness straightly into my heart, sadness which would swallow me like a star being swallowed by the endless darkness. Nobody, no truth, no sincerity, no strength, no kindness, no anything inside this world or outside in the universe could cure this kind of sorrow. She was gone, and all was gone, my happiness, my strength, my belief, my dream and anything which I had or pursued were gone along with her, disappearing into the darkness, never coming back. (Hang)

This was one of the excerpts of his writing that I chose to read out in a summary lecture, and the class was impressed by the powerful emotions expressed by Hang. His girlfriend eventually heard his writing and was so touched that she came back to him.

To a large extent, the Creative Writing course has performed the role of counselling, not only that between teacher and students, but also among students themselves, as pointed out by a female student Yuan:

Sadness, helpless or distress can swallow us up like darkness. But when I read stories resemble my experience, when I unfold the pages of feelings, which are also printed, in my heart, I saw a stream of light pierce into the dark and sooth me. Knowing somebody in this world share the same situation and emotion with me makes me feel better and relax. At least I am not alone. Furthermore, I can expect some encouragements in these stories to pull me out of the dark mess. (Yuan)

While most students agreed that such a sharing of experiences had been very important for them, a minority of students, in their reflection papers, commented that they would prefer it if the workshops focused more on writing techniques. However, the majority of the class preferred to use these sessions to express themselves in ways previously not available to them.

Finding one's voice

In many cases the student writers had difficulty managing their narrative voices. This provided a good opportunity to suggest various writing techniques to the class. For example, in Lu's story, through third-person narration, the writer depicts a patient mother who understands and excuses the behaviour of her daughter:

She had long known that her daughter wasn't so glue to home as the children of her friends who went home almost every week... It didn't matter at all, as long as her daughter would come home as often as possible, not wishing as frequently as once a week, but at least this Qing Ming Festival. (Lu)

However, the writer then inserts the voice of the narrator:

What a simple wish of a mother!
But she had to wait 45 minutes to find out the answer of this simple wish! And it was possible that her daughter would ruin this simple wish! (Lu)

Here the narration changes from the voice of a patient mother to the critical voice of the writer/daughter. She allowed her own voice to intrude, thus disturbing the narrative structure.

Another example appears in Le's 'A Letter to Star'. Le was burdened by guilt for allowing others to think that Star had broken their grandma's sewing machine. What made things worse was that Star had always looked up to Le:

You probably regard me as a respectable sister. However, I don't. There's something you should know, something you ought to know seven or eight years ago, something made you suffer all these years long.

I know, once something is broken, it can never be repaired. (Le)

Her comment that 'once something is broken, it can never be repaired' explained why she had cried in the workshop. She was convinced that Star could not accept her apology, and she did not deserve his respect. She thought Star would not forgive her. After she described how she broke the sewing machine, she added:

I guess, from the moment, you hate me.

Again, Le let her guilt overwhelm her, and imagined that Star already hated her even when he had no knowledge of it at all. She continued to say:

The old sewing machine could never be fixed, so do our feelings.

In her story, Le repeatedly assumed that the relationship between herself and Star was ruined, and, in so doing, she overstepped her boundaries as a first-person narrator in speaking/thinking for Star. When the above discrepancies were pointed out she learnt the importance of writing in an appropriate voice through understanding her experience.

Another student, Qian, also encountered the same problem in her narration when she wrote the story 'Live in Summer, Leave in Winter', which is about Jingjing, the son of her mother's good friend. Jingjing, seven or eight years Qian's senior, was a constant presence in her childhood. The story starts with a conversation between them:

'What are you reading, Brother Jingjing?'

'It is one of Jin Yong's books.'

'Oh, I see.' So that Chinese character that I didn't know was Yong then.

I continued my question, 'What's it about?'

'It's about...'. He stopped reading and scratched his head. 'I can't tell you now. You are too young to know anything about it. I will tell you the plot when you grow up.'

'You promise?' I looked him in the face.

'I promise.'

'That's a deal!'

I saw him grinned and scratched his head again, I giggled. (Qian)

A number of years passed, and, at the age of 21, Jingjing was found to have brain cancer. By then, Qian was a high school student, and she and Jingjing no longer saw each other often, as they had moved to different districts. Qian did visit Jingjing once with her family, but they did not have much to say to each other, except that Jingjing

congratulated her on having entered a prestigious school. When Qian heard that Jingjing had died, she was sad and tried to imagine how the death happened. However, with Jingjing as ‘my childhood playmate, my baby-sitter, my brother’ as she put it, Qian’s writing does not appear very coherent emotionally and logically. For example, there is no mention of the promise Jingjing made to Qian about sharing the story he read in the beginning of the story. When asked about why there was not enough detail about Jingjing when she visited him, Qian said that they had become very distant as adults because they had not been in touch much. Yet Qian ends the story with a very strong authorial voice, comparing life to summer and death to winter:

Sometimes you can predict when the winter comes, sometimes you cannot. When winter comes, you call, you cry, you curse, you can change nothing. Value your summer because you don’t know how long it will last. No matter it is summer or winter, Brother Jingjing, I miss you, I’ll never forget you. (Qian)

This ending is not entirely in tune with what has gone before, as the first-person narrator suddenly turns to the reader to give advice before—somewhat loudly—switching back to address Jingjing. When the question about this was raised in the workshop, Qian broke down and said she felt guilty about looking down on Jingjing because of his failure to get into a good high school. Qian wrote in her reflection paper:

Maybe because all our parents enjoy comparing their children’s grades so much, I began to judge a student by his grade or his school. I deleted the part about my opinion on him [Jingjing]. I felt so ashamed that I didn’t want to talk about it in public [workshop]. (Qian)

This is another example of the writer failing to control the narrative voice, which becomes visible in the writing. In Qian’s case, Jingjing’s death struck her very badly as she wrote:

I never thought about the fact that one may die in a young age before. Death is always beyond our young people’s consideration. But I was wrong.

In her reflection paper, she came back to the story:

Brother Jingjing’s death taught me a lot of things, how to treat others, how to treat my youth and time, and how to value my precious family and friends.

As a result of her new understanding of Jingjing’s story, Qian revised the story with a more consistent narrative voice.

Another female student Tian also encountered a problem with the narrative voice in a story she wrote about Dian, a student in Lingnan University in Hong Kong after an exchange program in creative writing brought them to each other. Tian wrote the story of ‘Love and Sin’, which is about Dian’s relationship with a man who turned to her after having abandoned his girlfriend who had a fatal disease. Tian wrote in the first person, with Dian as the focus of the story. Earlier in the story, Dian mentioned that she had a boyfriend, and Tian asked what his zodiac sign was. It turned out that Tian’s boyfriend was a Cancer. Then Tian let Dian narrate the story of how she met her

boyfriend, and when Dian got to the part where she learned that her boyfriend had abandoned his girlfriend, Tian broke the calm tone of narration to comment that:

‘What?! Well, it’s funny that I should feel surprised. Isn’t that what Cancers always do?’

Dian and the man did stop seeing each other for a year, with the latter coming back to her after saying good-bye to the other girlfriend. But Tian reacted strongly at hearing this, giving Dian the following unsolicited advice/warning:

‘Once cheator, always cheator’

Such comments from Tian in the story are obviously too intrusive and too aggressive, not only for the first-person narrator but also for the matter-of-fact voice that narrator adopts elsewhere in the story. Upon inquiry, Tian admitted her bias against men who were Cancer because she had been hurt by one. Although she said that she had got over the unhappy relationship, she admitted that she still had difficulty comprehending what had happened. I suggested she bring her own story into Dian’s so that they could be more interactive and this would help ease her anger as she wrote along. As a result, the first-person narrator’s voice did improve. However, since Tian remained angry when the story finished, she could never entirely control the narrative voice. Tian did, however, learn that she still had unresolved issues in her life and it could affect the objectivity of her writing.

Through the analysis of the relationship between the narrators’ voices and the states of mind of the writers, the students came to understand very well the importance of the consistency in narration. A female student, Yan, learned the difference between different voices in the third-person narrator and the first person narrator, when she wrote about the fact that she did not like her own voice and that talking to people made her nervous:

I try to picture my nervousness when people call... I try to find reasons to my nervousness; I try to make the whole thing logical; I even use the third person narrative trying to put myself a bit far from the nervous Mandy in the stories. But it failed. So I changed it into the first person narrative in the revision and hope it will show my emotions better and fully. (Yan)

Conclusion

This paper focuses largely on the experience-sharing aspect of the Creative Writing program. I taught to sophomores in the Department of English in Sun Yat-sen University, which was not something that I had fully anticipated at the beginning of the course. The course gave students the freedom to write about their lives, with students critiquing their peers’ stories in workshops. Instead of centring only on writing techniques, the students spent a significant amount of time sharing their life experiences in relation to the content of the workshopped stories. A female student, Jun, commented on this in her reflections about the course:

Writing is not only a talk between me and me, but also between me and other people, people who I care and who care me, or even who I don’t understand until I read

his/her writing! It is listening; it is sharing; it is understanding! And we give advice when they meet confusions in life; we offer help when they come across difficulties; we deliver comfort when they are sad. *Finally, we learn and we grow, from writing, from life.* (Jun)

Jun's appreciation of the therapeutic aspects of the course is partly motivated by the fact that the official counselling services of the university are not extensive enough to provide help to all the students who need it. I believe that the students also learnt how to improve their writing techniques, particularly in understanding the relationship between the narrator's voice and their own understanding of what they are writing about. The examples given in this paper suggest that my students learnt to better understand their own responses to their lives through an awareness of the narrative voice in their stories.

Although the original rationale for establishing the creative writing program was to enhance students' abilities in using English as a second language, an important and unexpected lesson for me was that such a writing course could also help students to learn about themselves and those around them. As a consequence, they appeared not only to improve their writing proficiency, but also their ability to deal with their own emotions and their own experiences.

Notes

1. Creative Writing has been taught in Chinese as a discipline only recently. To the author's knowledge, in 2010 two universities in Shanghai offered this option. There has been debate in China (as in many other countries in Asia) about whether Creative Writing is a teachable discipline.
2. All the quotes in this paper are cited with the permission of the following students: Yuting Chen, Xiaobo Lin, Lu Huang, Le Xie, Hang Tu, Qiaoyuan Lin, Huiqian Chen, Mengtian Sun, Liuyan Chen and Haojun Zhang. They also agreed to have their stories told in this paper.

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