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Unintended intentions

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UNINTENDED INTENTIONS?

Some years ago, in a northern UK university, I delivered a short presentation on the subject of teaching creative writing entitled 'Licensing Chaos'. It was not appreciated...

Presentations being what they are, capsules of rhetoric, the haiku (or even limerick) of public address, there was no time to examine in depth the pros and cons of a rigorously vague (as opposed to a vaguely rigorous) approach to creative writing assessment.

Even more years ago, in another provincial UK university¹, when discussing with colleagues ways and means of assessing both achievement and progression I suggested accrediting the student rather than the course. This wasn't appreciated either. Though I tell a lie: it was initially very much appreciated, before the realities of a diverse but often inflexible worldwide², or at least university-wide assessment template were brought into the conversation and the dream of ipsative innovation - of empowering a student to study and indeed repeat writing modules of any level and be judged on the hopefully improving quality of work - died.

And yet...

In recent years the phrase 'aims and objectives' in constructing teaching units or modules or courses has been largely superseded by 'intended learning outcomes'. With the best of intentions, to be sure... To refine the meanings of descriptors so that both the teachers and the taught can advance clear-headed toward the objectives which now beckon under the softer syllables of outcomes.

And yet...

Most formally assessed education requires the student to explicitly affirm their assimilation/understanding of the principles/information they have been taught - whereas, with creative writing, however the pedagogy varies from place to place and country to country, what is required is the production of an artefact which inherently demonstrates/utilizes/deploys those principles, that information.

Thus, the exegetic weight of the process is thrown back onto the tutor/assessor. Perhaps this already begins to shift at what might be called the 'transition threshold' of that weight between first and second degrees, and perhaps again at the transition between MA and PhD in Britain - though perhaps back the other way at this point? Or perhaps in this rarefied zone the exegetic weight is in constant flux? Albeit in higher (sic?) (transit?) education, from Masters level up, in many UK universities, including yet another provincial university, where I previously external examined, a commentary/gloss is yoked³ to the creative work in order to redress the balance. Such commentaries allow the marker to more accurately 'meter' the gap between intention and effect/achievement. But whose intention?

Whose intention is predominantly served - the tutor's or the writer's - and how crystallized is the student's intention? Redrafting can serve both masters⁴ perhaps? Show your working out... what was focused upon, what changed, what not changed, what changed then changed back then changed again... and why? What's better (define)? What's worse (define)? What's gained? What's lost? (another defined mess...) AND IS IT ANY GOOD!⁵

Ah, the pressures of exegesis on work-in-progress: the pressure to be overly harsh/prescriptive/declarative in feedback - 'fix my writing, dear tutor'. Conversely, the terms 'sympathetic' or 'supportive' often found in that uber-descriptor of the university course, the prospectus, come back to haunt: the first is too overlaid with connotation to be useful, the latter surely to be taken as a given in a competently designed/structured/taught writing module/course/degree?

But this apostrophe has led us with appropriate serendipity away from considering assessment of artefact to assessment of a different colour (or at least shade) - a movement of emphasis along the continuum from assessment of intended outcome to assessment of process. The black-and-white influential concept of constructive alignment advocates the aligning of planned learning activities and assessment with learning outcomes. (Imagine, Invent, Create, find just the right verb to start writing your intended learning outcome.)

But...

What if the student's constructed knowledge isn't entirely planned – the dye not (completely) loaded? Assessment then of necessity involves evaluating both process and achieved knowledge.

Back to the commentary. In the increasingly populous and frenetic world of undergraduate assessment the practicality and value of additional appended comment/reflection is sometimes questioned.

But...

Perhaps such commentary might *save* time – if the commentary is forensic rather than discursive. That is, if the focus is not on the artefact finally submitted for summative scrutiny (discursive), but on the thought-journey undertaken to get to that artefact. Such a commentary might potentially also allow the student to *collaborate* in setting assessment criteria – earlier peer-review experience might prepare the way for this?

Would such a commentary actually help to objectify the subjective in this most subjective of subjects? (Humanities assessment still utilizes the tutor's judgment rather than a matrix – horses for (literally) courses.) Or might this particular colour of horse even create an overall artefact which actually hybridizes the apollonian and Dionysian? That takes the 'versus' out of academic writing versus writing.

And... (Or but...)

Might this not shift the very nature of assessment? The joint overriding purpose of assessment is seen as the provision of a 'mark'⁶ which in itself and concomitantly aids a student's writing development, these two often conflated in the minds of both tutor and tutee - but this is a potentially dangerous conflation, the first implacably Newtonian the second fiendishly quantum. Not to mention (a slip of the paralipsis) that the use of second and third markers, in effect the assessment of assessment, opens yet another can of wormholes into parallel universes.

But (again) all of this moves us ever further down the rabid hole of (con)sequent assessment. It's not too late, even after eight-hundred and sixty-seven words, to defy the gravitational pull of the mass of orth and even unorthodoxy and go into a classroom with a set of poetic descriptors which task not focus or expansion, closure or ambiguation, but the tension between? Descriptors that license deviation and serendipity. That send the teacher into that classroom with stimulus rather than intention – the intention of the unintended learning outcome...

“...and if others can see it as I have seen it, then it may be called a vision rather than a dream.”⁷

ENDNOTES

1. Caveat: the reader should read what follows as the product of a provincial northern UK writer...
2. Such inflexibilities, it should be added, differ across the globe.
3. A loaded term, to be sure, connoting an onerous addition to a student's workload, and admittedly more easily mapped onto the UK or Australian model than the US. However, wherever and whatever writing is

produced for (at least in part) purposes of assessment, whether explicitly in the form of a critical addition to the creative, or implicitly as a more ghostly pressure in the 'wholly-creative' writing qualification, a yoke of some kind exists?

4. Pun intended, particularly for a provincial UK readership.

5. Philip Emery, 'A Poor Thing', *New Writing International Journal for the Practice and Theory of Creative Writing* Vol.9 No.1, March 2012 (179-181).

6. A visible impression, stain, etc.; a sign, symbol, or other indication that distinguishes something; *slang*. A suitable victim for swindling –Collins English Dictionary.

7. William Morris, *News from Nowhere* (Come in Mister Morris, hopefully your time isn't yet up...)