Debate, discourse and productive disagreement: interrogating the performative dimensions of authorship in the creative writing classroom

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ABSTRACT

The creative writing curriculum has historically focussed on discipline-specific skills, developing students’ proficiency in literary forms, craft and techniques. However, contemporary writers are increasingly expected to participate in the economy of ideas through festival appearances, debates, and other forms of public speaking – skills that the creative writing curriculum has yet to fully contend with. We argue for the value of teaching debate as a distinct topic of inquiry for creative writing students, and hold that pedagogical innovation is required to address the changing nature of literary cultures and their increasing orientation towards performativity. This article establishes a new pedagogical model designed to introduce creative writing students to the study and practice of debate, comprising four key stages: modelling, scaffolding, debating and reflection. This learning progression not only fosters students’ oral argumentation skills, but also prompts critical reflection on the way key ideas in their field connect with their creative works. We contend that introducing debate into the creative writing curriculum addresses broader shifts in the writing and publishing industry, and that oral argumentation and debate should be considered key graduate competencies for creative writing students in the twenty-first century.

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I. Changing contexts of literary culture: the rise of the festival and the author as performer

Twenty-first century literary culture is defined, in part, by unprecedented access and exchange between readers and writers. Literary festivals now form the key professional context in which contemporary creative writing is read, performed, debated and discussed (Lodge 2015). The rise of the literary festival as a popular forum for discussing and engaging with contemporary literature has coincided with publishers’ growing expectations that writers engage performatively with their audiences, undertaking regular public speaking about the ideation behind their creative works and their influences, and developing a presence and persona on social media platforms. Literary festivals have responded to this unprecedented public demand for contact with writers, altering their programming focus to reflect a more ideas-driven agenda, with writers increasingly being programmed on
panels to debate and discuss often controversial topics (Stewart 2013). This shift has coincided with the rise of celebrity authors, a phenomenon that has seen large book advances and deals monopolised by celebrities rather than professional authors, and a fall in income among writers who do not command large social media followings (Kean 2017). While the phenomenon of the celebrity author is vexed, and the economy of attention in which authors are expected to compete is arguably to the detriment of literary culture, the reality is that contemporary writers are increasingly asked to perform publicly in order to satisfy the demands of both their publishers and audiences.

As a result of the shift towards this public and performative role of the author, contemporary writers are under pressure not only to discuss their own work in public, but also to engage with broader debates animating their field, including the state of the publishing industry, the prize economy, the ethics of representation, and other current issues. Recent high-profile scandals and confrontations at literary festivals around the world – such as the international debate spawned by novelist Lionel Shriver’s keynote at the Brisbane Writers’ Festival in 2016 (Nordland 2016), the protests surrounding novelist Junot Diaz’s appearance at the Sydney Writers’ Festival (Harmon 2018), and the conflict during Indigenous author Rebecca Benson’s keynote at the Vancouver Writers’ Festival (Lederman 2018), among others – illustrate the fractious tenor of this debate. Often fanned further by online engagement and amplification, these debates and incidents underscore the reality that the public utterances of the contemporary author are under ever-increasing scrutiny. Participation in this high-stakes literary economy of ideas increasingly requires writers to exhibit high-level verbal communication and debating skills, as well as disciplinary excellence in written works. These skills, of course, are not unique to creative writers, nor are they new in literary culture – but we argue that the shift towards a performative model of authorship driven by the rise in the literary festival necessitates a renewed focus and interrogation of just what these changes herald for the careers of young and emerging writers.

While the context in which contemporary writers operate has become more and more performative, public and debate-driven, creative writing courses in a university context have been relatively slow to respond. As Bridgstock and Tippett have noted, tertiary institutions tend to ‘emphasise content knowledge and transmissive pedagogies’ (2019, 2); in the field of creative writing, this is especially so. Creative writing tends to be conceptualised as a solitary pursuit, and the curriculum at a tertiary level is overwhelmingly oriented ‘toward writerly craft’ (Amato and Fleisher 2001), to the exclusion of transferable ‘social skills such as communication and teamwork’ (Bridgstock and Tippett 2019, 23). Consequently, creative writing students spend the majority of their studies focussing on learning and executing different forms and techniques of creative writing. While some of these skills are not unique to creative writing – such as editing – many others are discipline-specific, and mostly or wholly relevant only to the domain of creative writing (Bridgstock and Tippett 2019, 23).

In our experience, the creative writing curriculum’s long-standing emphasis on discipline-specific skills and techniques reflects student demand. Most creative writing students are predominantly interested in questions of craft, and pursue creative writing precisely because they enjoy its individual, meditative, and iterative nature. We are not suggesting that this emphasis could or should change. We affirm the primacy of solo writing and editing as fundamental to the study of creative writing – but we also hold
that it is valuable for students to develop complementary skills in argumentation and debate, and a critical understanding of the role public speaking increasingly plays in contemporary authorship. Too often, creative writing students graduate unprepared for the performative dimensions of authorship, and without the requisite transferable social and communication skills that will assure broad employability in the creative industries.

In this paper, we argue that pedagogical innovation is required in creative writing teaching practice to address the changing nature of literary cultures and their increasing orientation towards literary festivals and performativity. In particular, we argue for the necessity of creative writing courses and instructors to prepare creative writing students to interrogate the performative dimensions of authorship. It is our position that increasing student participation in, and awareness of, contemporary debates in writing, and developing student confidence in public speaking and debate are fundamentally important graduate capabilities for creative writers.

While many creative writing classrooms do integrate oral discussion and presentation of creative work within the curriculum, we argue that there is great value in studying debate and argumentation as a distinct topic of enquiry within a creative writing degree, and suggest that public debate of the kind that unfolds at literary festivals is distinct from other forms of discussion that traditionally occur within the creative writing classroom. It is our position that through examining the nature of debate and argumentation, and exploring the rise of performative authorship, students are better equipped not only to interrogate and critically question the changing nature of authorship and literary culture, but also, ultimately, to participate in it themselves.

After identifying this gap in creative writing pedagogy, we decided to investigate the value of teaching debate as a distinct topic of study within the creative writing degree, developing both a pedagogical model and a new course which integrated the model, which we have now delivered twice. Our model – comprising the four steps of modelling, scaffolding, debating, and reflection – guides students from a theoretical understanding of the value of debate to the practical experience of it, and concludes by encouraging students to anchor and integrate these ideas into their creative work. Our four-step model draws on existing and well-established creative writing pedagogies of modelling and scaffolding, as well as pedagogical approaches which are new in the creative writing context, such as debate and argumentation dialogue (Baker et al. 2020).

In this paper, we explore both the steps of our model and some reflections on how it has functioned in practice through a new creative writing course, Dangerous Ideas: Contemporary Debates in Writing. Dangerous Ideas is structured according to our four-step model, moving students from modelling and scaffolding through to performative debate and reflection. We begin by defining the pedagogical approach underpinning the development of our model, before examining the steps of the model in detail, along with pragmatic examples of learning activities and assessment from our case study course. In doing so, we establish new knowledge about how creative writing courses can increase students’ critical awareness of the increasingly performative dimensions of authorship, and identify pedagogical techniques that foster student confidence and participation in public performance and debate. We conclude by reflecting on the first two iterations of the course delivery, examining student feedback and our own reflections on the successes and challenges of teaching debating as a discrete topic of study within a creative writing degree. The model we propose in this paper is a starting point,
rather than an end point, and still subject to further refinement; nonetheless, we hope it will prove useful to other educators as they too grapple with how to align the creative writing curriculum to a shifting literary culture that finds its locus, more often than not, on the debate-driven festival stage.

II. Formulating a curricular response: fostering transferable communication skills among creative writing graduates through a new pedagogical approach

Our approach to developing this model is deeply informed by dialogic pedagogy, which views students as active collaborators and leaders in their learning journey rather than passive recipients of knowledge (Matusov 2009, 146), and aims to stimulate active and self-directed learning. It is well-established that engaging students in dialogic, open communication encourages them to explore both divergences and convergences in opinion with their peers and teachers (Trausan-Matu 2020, 461), and exposes them to diverse, or ‘polyphonic’ voices and viewpoints (Trausan-Matu 2020, 458). Dialogic pedagogy values a multiplicity of argumentative modes, including persuasion, negotiation, deliberation, information-seeking and eristic dialogues (Krabbe and Walton 2011); exposure to these modes of argumentation encourages students to build a reflective identity that is connected to others (Bridgstock and Tippett 2019, 26).

In addition to the well-established benefits of dialogic pedagogy, recent scholarship has also affirmed the value of argumentation and debate in student learning (Resnick et al. 2020, 559). Baker et al. posit that, through argument and discussion, ‘students who find their views contested [can] be led to reflect, to explain, to critically examine their opinions and creatively find (counter-)arguments,’ and affirm that ‘such socio-cognitively intense activities are beneficial in educational terms’ (2020, 76). The end goal of argumentation and debate in the classroom is not consensus, but a constructive, collaborative discourse in which meanings are negotiated and renegotiated on the basis of ‘the play of free and open debate’ (Wegerif 2020, 22). The outcomes of argumentation dialogues and debates are, as Baker et al. note, rarely an ‘all or nothing’ change of view or consensus among students, but rather the ‘elaborat[ion of] more subtle, concessive views, integrating counter-arguments’ (2020, 81). Ultimately, as Wegerif observes, dialogic theory ‘claims that each act of learning is creative which means that each individual learner will learn in their own way,’ (2020, 22) empowering them as individuals while also encouraging them to view their own ideas as connected and related to a network others. This is reflective of a growing consensus that recognises that ‘each graduate will develop a unique personal capability set which forms the basis and expression of their distinctive graduate identity’ (Bridgstock and Tippett 2019, 24).

Yet in spite of the growing body of evidence supporting the value of argumentation and debate in learning, and the increasing expectations of authors as performers, creative writing pedagogies remain oriented towards transmitting discipline-specific skills. This solipsistic focus is reflective of the common tenet that creative writing is an ‘isolated practice’ (Batty 2016, 69) – a view that is increasingly out of step with the realities of life as a writer in the twenty-first century. While discussion has historically formed a significant component of creative writing workshop pedagogy, and creative writing students are therefore well-equipped to negotiate meaning orally (Ristow 2014, 94), these skills are
generally developed implicitly rather than explicitly in the creative writing curriculum. We argue that examining argumentation and debate as distinct objects of inquiry, as well as encouraging students to critically interrogate the rise of festival culture, aligns the creative writing curriculum more closely to developments in literary culture and offers students valuable insight into the performative dimensions of authorship and to weigh the value of argumentation and public speaking on a writer’s career.

Informed by a pedagogical approach that privileges dialogic communication and affirms the value of argument and debate in student learning, our four-step model was designed with clear learning outcomes in mind: to develop students’ oral presentation and argumentation skills, to increase students’ engagement with key contemporary debates animating the field of creative writing, to encourage students to critically reflect on the rise of literary festivals and the role of debate in contemporary literary culture, and to explore how their own creative work relates to the ideas of others, allowing them to build a connected identity (Bridgstock and Tippett 2019, 26). These key learning outcomes supplement the traditional learning outcomes delivered by the traditional creative writing curriculum – including proficiency in critiquing, close reading, analysis, and the knowledge and execution of literary forms and modes – with those focussed on increasing student understanding of debate and argumentation. These performative skills are necessary graduate attributes for writers, complementing discipline-specific skills and knowledge with transferable communication, argumentation and debate skills that increase creative writing students’ employability across disciplines.

The well-documented decline in print publishing, the rise of digital publishing and the entry of disruptive technologies into the publishing market mean that creative writing graduates must prepare for entry into increasingly diverse graduate destinations, including arts administration, journalism, literary agencies, policy formulation, editing and publishing, speech-writing, digital media, and other emergent fields. In this context, a renewed focus on transferable skills in the creative writing curriculum is necessary; it is clear that as creative writing graduates pursue diverse careers, communication, argumentation and oral presentation skills will be integral to their future success.

### III. Establishing a model for integrating debate into the creative writing curriculum

In this section, we discuss each of the four steps in our model, and offer a series of examples of related learning exercises drawn from our course, Dangerous Ideas: Contemporary Debates in Writing. We offer these exercises as exemplars, but our model could be adapted to a range of alternative learning activities following the same progression. Our model comprises four key steps:

- **Step 1:** Modelling debate and argumentative discussion through lectures, set readings and case studies that provide a spectrum of opinions and arguments on emerging debates and issues.
- **Step 2:** Scaffolding argumentative interactions through a series of linked learning activities that develop debate skills and prepare students for oral argumentation.
- **Step 3:** Debating: participation in a formal debate, testing and demonstrating the skills acquired through previous steps in a live debating scenario, receiving feedback from peers and teammates.
Step 4: Reflection on the ways in which contemporary debates are connected to the students’ own creative writing practice, and critical analysis of the performative dimensions of authorship.

When establishing our model, we were acutely aware that debating is an unusual and unfamiliar – and therefore frequently intimidating – learning activity for creative writing students. Consequently, the first two steps of our model focus on allaying student fears and adequately preparing them to approach this novel task. However, we recognise that a number of students may not be able to participate in debating verbally due to different learning requirements, or may not feel comfortable presenting their arguments in the high-pressure context of a classroom. We detail alternative assessment options that we have developed to contend with a diversity of student participation requirements in Step 3 of our model.

**Step 1: modelling**

Modelling is a well-established constructivist pedagogical technique that is integrated into our four-step model as a method of supporting students who are anxious or unfamiliar with the practice and process of debating. Modelling recognises that when a task is unfamiliar to students, frequently they learn best by witnessing others successfully execute the same activity or behaviour. Modelling is especially helpful in encouraging students to participate in oral argumentation: Ogan-Bekiroglu and Belek argue that model-based learning can effectively develop students’ argumentation skills, enabling their capacity to ‘form a reasoned argument, and assess evidence and claims critically’ (2014, 61), as well as increasing the number of arguments and ideas learners can generate (2014, 67). We integrated model-based learning into our lecture schedule, learning activities and set readings, all of which offer students exemplars of successful, convincing and well-evidenced argumentation in a range of different styles.

We opted to incorporate modelling principally through our course’s lecture schedule, which was presented as a mix between traditional lecture formats and innovative conversational and panel-style lectures in which we simulate the performative space of the literary festival. Teaching staff and guest lecturers model successful debates and conversations in the lecture theatre, providing diverse exemplars of the exchange of ideas that occurs at literary festivals. Students learn techniques of effective and persuasive argumentation by observing lecturers, teaching staff and peers doing so in the dynamic space of the lecture theatre. In addition to modelling in the lecture theatre we also encourage students to participate in situated learning by attending a local writers festival where they are able to experience the performative space of a literary festival firsthand, and to reflect on the value of discussion, argument and debate in contemporary literary culture.

We chose to complement this performative modelling with traditional lectures, each centring on a different current debate. These traditional lectures provide students with foundational theory and a spectrum of contrasting opinions on any given debate. The following lecture schedule is an illustration of how performative modelling and traditional lectures can be blended over the course of the semester:
Alongside this lecture schedule, we also modelled diverse viewpoints through the course’s reading list, which presents students with a spectrum of views on the topics discussed in lectures each week, as well as video exemplars of live debates. As Ahmed and Cremin note, productive dialogue and learning ‘must allow for, acknowledge and facilitate difference, in order to generate understanding’ (2020, 595). We aimed to facilitate difference by presenting students with a polyphonomous field of voices and opinions on each topic in the weekly readings. For example, in the week that focusses on the subject of cultural appropriation, we centred the readings around a particular case study: Lionel Shriver’s controversial keynote address from the 2016 Brisbane Writers Festival which went viral internationally. We presented the text of Shriver’s speech alongside several prominent critiques and responses to Shriver, writers’ perspectives on appropriation, as well as excerpts from theoretical texts that define appropriation in art and writing:

Throughout the course, we encouraged students to volunteer examples of emerging literary debates that they have discovered for class discussion, and to reflect on how the debates connect to their own creative work. We found that this dialogic approach engaged students to lead their own learning as active participants (Matusov 2009, 149), and encouraged them to seek out their own preferred models to complement those presented in the course materials and lectures. The use of modelling as a first step is designed to make students comfortable with a diverse range of argumentation styles and to illustrate to students the increasingly performative nature of contemporary authorship.
**Step 2: scaffolding**

The second step of our model is scaffolding, an iterative process in which students are prepared to deliver and present a debate. The concept of scaffolding emerges from constructivist pedagogical theory in the context of child education, and refers to a teaching practice which is a combination of self-directed learning activities combined with periodic guidance from the instructor (Wood et al. 1976, 90; Bruner 1986, 123), in a ‘graduated intervention’ (Greenfield 1984, 119). Scaffolding offers a structured approach to developing new skills which, as Teagarden et al. have established, is also a process that can ‘help students willingly work outside their comfort zones’ (2018, 125). We use the term to broadly signify a teaching practice in which knowledge and skills are developed incrementally in a mostly self-directed fashion, with minimal and targeted intervention from the instructor.

Scaffolding offers students the opportunity to test out ideas and arguments – and, critically, to fail – in a welcoming environment. This step of our model invites students to collectively negotiate the terms and ideas under discussion through a series of structured exercises that increase in complexity over the semester, guided at key moments by interventions by the instructor. A graduated, structured approach is vital when asking students to engage with complex, new and unfamiliar learning experiences (Coulson and Harvey 2013, 403); scaffolding supports students as they engage with ideas that may feel challenging or complex, and as they work towards actively participating in group debates. This step of the model engages students in a supportive approach to argumentation and debate, offering them the opportunity to develop the necessary skills and techniques iteratively before they participate in live debating. Through scaffolding, students are also encouraged to reflect on the nature of argumentation, discourse and dialogue, and develop self-awareness about how they structure and present their own arguments.

The scaffolding step of our model focuses on developing increased confidence in public speaking among creative writing students. Public speaking anxiety is most often ‘linked to presenting in a formal setting’ (Nash et al. 2016, 588), so we identified that it would be critical to progressively increase students’ oral confidence and competency in developing clear, informed arguments before asking them to participate in the formal debate itself in front of a larger audience. In order to do so, we presented a range of small-group activities designed to allay student fear, which are self-led and collaborative rather than formal, instructor-driven tasks. The self-directed nature of these activities allows students to progress at their own pace and prepares them for the social dimensions of debating and argumentation by teaching them to negotiate meaning collectively. Because many student fears are linked to apprehension about performing in a formal setting, we also developed an activity to address this in the form of a practice debate in an informal setting, with students seated comfortably and given the opportunity to consult notes, with minimal and strategic interventions by the instructor. Practicing oral communication and argument in an open, responsive setting offers students the critical opportunity to test out their developing skills and reflect on their performance (Robinson and Udall 2006, 95) prior to the assessment task itself.

We offer the following exercises as examples of possible scaffolded learning activities to guide students incrementally through the process of preparing for debate:
Week 2 • Students watch several recorded debates which model successful argumentation, and are guided through dialogic discussion to identify and discuss successful debate techniques and approaches.

Week 3 • Students select their chosen debate proposition, which in previous iterations of Dangerous Ideas included the following options:
   ○ ‘Literary’ is a meaningless category
   ○ The Nobel Prize for Literature is irrelevant
   ○ Writers should serve the tastes of their audiences
   • Students then arrange themselves into affirmative and negative teams, and are guided through the process of researching their proposition with peers.

Week 4 • Modelling themselves on the exemplar debates presented in Week 1, students collaboratively define each speaker’s role within their team, and clarify the cohesive and logical progression of their argument.
   • Students undertake a practice debate, with half of the class adopting the affirmative position, and the other the negative position. In these two large groups, students brainstorm and define the claim (the idea being argued), warrant (evidence used to argue the point) and impact (why the debate matters), along with the types of research required to argue the motion. As a class, students then dialogically discuss how each side might frame their argument and divide their ideas into three speakers.

Week 5 • Students participate in an informal practice debate on a topic of their choice, building confidence in performance through peer feedback and practice.
   • Students are guided through the preparation of their rebuttals, requiring them to adopt alternative perspectives and incorporate counter-arguments.

Week 6 • Students perform in a live group debate in front of their peers, followed by a short class discussions where all students are able to articulate how their own views have evolved, and been challenged through listening to the debate.

Week 7 • Students receive formative feedback on their individual performance in the debate from teaching staff, as well as their group’s overall performance.

These scaffolded exercises are intended to emphasise ‘social learning’ (MacGillivray 2017, 30) through collaboration, discussion and negotiation between students as they work towards producing a cohesive argument, vital skills for twenty-first century graduates. As we implemented this step of the model in our course, we also designed support for students who are unable to communicate verbally or unable to participate in the live debate by offering a series of alternative options, including at-home recorded presentations or the submission of a written document in lieu of a verbal presentation. These alternatives enabled students across a wide range of learning styles and needs to develop core debate and argumentation skills even if they were unable to participate in a live debate.

**Step 3: debating**

In our third step, students participate in a live debate, putting the new skills and knowledges they have developed through the previous steps into practice. This step engages students in ‘argumentation dialogue’ (Baker et al. 2020, 81), and negotiation with their peers as they contest key ideas in their field. It also asks them to respond in real time with a degree of spontaneity to counter-arguments. Argumentation dialogue is valuable not only because it fosters
an exchange of (counter-)arguments but [also because it is] an occasion for intense negotiation of meaning and transformation of conceptualisations in discourse … questions debated and theses proposed or critiqued are rarely fixed once and for all: they are gradually co-constructed. (Baker et al. 2020, 81)

Ultimately, debates allow for the ‘intense negotiation of meaning’ (Baker et al. 2020, 81) through the social exchange of ideas. While these argumentation skills are valuable for all humanities students, they hold a special relevance for creative writing students as a result of the ascendancy of the literary festival and the increasingly performative dimensions of contemporary authorship.

Setting a debate as a distinct assessment task encourages students to view the process of preparing for and participating in the debate as a specific analytical and critical activity. Through debate, students participate in the free exchange of ideas and in argumentative interaction that the lectures, set texts and teaching staff have modelled in Step 1, supported by the scaffolding of Step 2. There are many ways this step might be reflected in assessment tasks; we opted to stage our assessment as a formal debate in a performative setting that simulates aspects of the literary festival stage. While formal debates are by no means identical to literary panels at festivals, they do share certain qualities: the requirement to think spontaneously, to respond to the ideas of others, to negotiate meaning orally, and to present a considered position to an audience in public. Of all the assessment approaches we contemplated, we found the use of the formal debate especially appropriate, because it allowed for a combination of prepared writing – in the form of the argument students prepare for – and spontaneous speech, in the form of a rebuttal.

We asked students on alternating teams to speak sequentially for seven minutes apiece, articulation both their own argument and any rebuttals of their opposition. Our students performed their debates in front of an audience of their peers and teachers, who contributed to an informal discussion afterwards simulating audience engagement at a literary festivals. The criteria we developed to gauge student performance in the debate assessed students’ individual public speaking skills, their performance of their roles within the overall team, and their capacity to respond to the arguments of others.

This introduction of a formal debate into the creative writing classroom equips students not only with critically important public speaking and debating skills that prepare them for the performative dimensions of authorship, but also with transferable communicative and ‘collaborative sociability’ skills that may ‘assist in breaking down ossified or siloed approaches to creative research and thinking’ (Webb and Hetherington 2016) in their future careers. This step also provides students with a further opportunity to reflect on and contrast how literary meaning can be negotiated in a festival setting and in written works.

**Step 4: reflection**

We conclude our model with reflection, a step which encourages students to consider the ways in which current literary debates inform or connect to their own creative work. The value of reflection as a pedagogical tool is well-established: it allows students to develop their own ‘unique personal capability set’ (Bridgstock and Tippett 2019, 24) based on their
specific interests, background and goals during their studies, as well as to view their own ideas and creative work in relation to others. This step is an opportunity for students to bridge the gap between the performative aspects of authorship with their own written creative works. In this step, we ask students to consider their position within a networked community of practice, and to connect their own works with the ideas that are animating the field of creative writing. This reflection allows students to form a ‘pre-professional identity’ and to build a ‘connection with the skills, qualities, conduct, culture and ideology of a [their] intended profession’ (Jackson 2016, 926).

We intend for the final reflective step of our model to encourage students to see their creative outputs and their developing authorial identity as part of a network of current events, debates, ideas, writers and thinkers. Due to the rapidly transforming nature of graduate employment in the creative industries and the pivot towards collaborative work models, it is critical for creative writing instructors to foster ‘communities and networks for learning, and the capabilities that learners will need in order to make the most of these in their lives and work’ (Bridgstock and Tippett 2019, 2).

As with the other steps of our model, there are a variety of learning activities and assessments that could fulfil the purpose of reflection. We opted to enable reflection by asking students to develop a piece of original creative writing and a short rationale in response to a contemporary literary debate. The creative work may be in any form or genre, but it must be accompanied by a rationale in which the student articulates the links between the debates discussed over the semester and its expression in their creative work. We designed this reflective task – with its open brief and emphasis on students’ self-directed choices and preferences – to encourage students to integrate the ideas they have canvassed over the course of the semester in a way that suits their aims and objectives as individual writers.

Where the three previous steps of our model focus on collegial, collaborative and social skills, the final step aims to refocus students on their individual interests and perspectives. Through reflection on the relationship between their creative work and international discourses in creative writing, this final step in our model enables students to develop an awareness of their own relational positioning, and come to view themselves as members of a connected community of creative practice, even as they pursue their individual creative works.

IV. Reflections on successes and challenges

We conclude by reflecting on both the successes and challenges we have experienced in instituting our model and delivering it through the learning activities designed for our Dangerous Ideas course. In developing a model that would introduce debate and argumentative interactions to undergraduate creative writing students, we were faced with several challenges. First and foremost, students were highly apprehensive about the prospect of participating in a live group debate or discussion. They felt they lacked confidence in argumentation, and that they were unfamiliar with the format of a formal debate. They also expressed reluctance to participate in collaborative discussion, due to a firmly-ingrained self-perception of their creative writing practice as an isolated, individual pursuit. They did not view their own creative writing as connected to contemporary developments and debates in the field, and had rarely, if ever, reflected on how their creative work was situated in the relation to that of others. They were also reluctant to abandon the ideals of perfection and completion – frequently the goals in written creative works, which
are revised until they are ‘finished’ – for the more spontaneous and uncontrollable nature of public debate.

This student reluctance was difficult to overcome; at the outset of the course, students expressed firm reservations about debating and public speaking and doubted their abilities to complete the learning activities. By the end of the course, however, we saw the benefits of our four-step model, which struck a balance between acknowledging and accommodating students’ fears, and encouraging their incremental acquisition of confidence. Both qualitative and quantitative student feedback revealed students’ initial fears were largely assuaged as they gained the benefits of modelling, scaffolding, debating and reflection. Students’ early comments in a voluntary anonymised survey reflected their nervousness and anxiety about the prospect of the public speaking:

- ‘I was hesitant with this unit at first, but so far I’ve found the topics fascinating’ (2018 Week 3 survey)
- ‘[The tutor] has an infectious energy and makes me more motivated to learn despite my hate for debates’ (2018 Week 3 survey)

By the conclusion of the semester, students reported feeling overwhelmingly positive about their experience participating in the debate, and the value of the course’s focus on the performative dimensions of authorship. The course – undertaken by a cohort of 80 students in their second year of study – attained an average approval rate of over 4.5 out of a possible 5 in both years of offering, and qualitative comments by students further affirmed the value of analytically exploring the performative dimensions of authorship and participating in debate and argumentation. Student comments emphasised the transformations in their thinking facilitated through the learning activities and assessment, as reflected in these examples:

- ‘A fantastic subject … that has really caused me to reconsider why I believe the things I believe.’ (2019 Week 13 Survey)
- ‘I like the idea of equipping writers with the tools to defend their work.’ (2019 Week 13 Survey)
- ‘I liked this class because it opened my eyes to the topics surrounding the writing and publishing industry, and allowed me to form my opinions on my own without having them thrust on me.’ (2018 Week 13 survey)
- ‘It’s very useful for contextualising the rest of our work and preparing us to be professional authors out in the world.’ (2018 Week 13 survey)

Importantly, the small cohort of students who were unable to participate in the live debate due to differing learning requirements and who instead pre-recorded their performances or submitted their arguments in writing also reflected positively on the act of learning about and interrogating debate.

In addition to challenge of overcoming student reluctance to debate, we were also faced with the challenge of designing a model that fostered productive disagreement and debate among students while still providing a respectful learning environment. We identified early on the importance of presenting students with a spectrum of opinions that would challenge orthodoxies of thought, including oppositional and polemical
ones. We were aware that introducing students to a range of perspectives, including those which students did not agree with or perhaps even vehemently opposed, would prove a potential challenge in spite of it being of fundamental importance in the modelling phase. This need to provide a diversity of viewpoints to the students, and to establish an environment in which students felt free to experiment with ideas without the fear of censorship or opprobrium had to be carefully balanced with the need to make all students feel welcome in the classroom. We believe that modelling was key to the successful presentation of these sometimes confrontational ideas and opinions to students; through witnessing our own performance of productive disagreement in panel-style lectures, as well as video exemplars provided to them, students came to value debate as a means of reaching new and more nuanced understandings.

We have now delivered the course twice to two cohorts of 80 students, and early indications suggest that students find great value in studying debate as a distinct object of inquiry within a creative writing degree. Students reported increased understanding of the performative aspects of authorship through their experience of the modelling, scaffolding and debating phases, and many drew insightful parallels between the ideas explored during these three steps, and the creative work they were pursuing. While not all students experienced the same learning trajectory, overall, we observed an increased sophistication in the ideation students brought to their final piece of creative work, and a more nuanced and subtle expression of ideas in the classroom as the semester progressed. We also observed a marked increase in student confidence as students moved through the four steps, building from a theoretical understanding of the value of debate and argumentation to the practical experience of it, and then integrating these learnings into their creative works.

An important and welcome corollary of introducing debates into the creative writing classroom we observed was the high degree of social collaboration they produced among students. Debates require students to work closely in small teams, negotiating the division of labour, developing ideas and approaches collectively, and resolving conflict and disagreement through teamwork. We were pleased to observe creative writing students negotiating sometimes difficult issues and ideas through collaborative argumentation. Of course, there have been occasions when students have taken offense to their ideas being challenged or an oppositional idea expressed by a peer; in these instances, teaching staff intervene to help students negotiate these moments – but even these moments of charged disagreement often ultimately produce more nuanced understandings among students in the end, even if they remain in fundamental disagreement on a topic.

Overall, we believe our approach to engaging students in an analytical and critical examination of the performative dimensions of authorship is not only supported by the pedagogical literature and research and our own experiences as practising writers, but by student and teaching staff feedback, which has affirmed the value and need for the integration of debate, argumentation and oral communication skills into the creative writing curriculum. We are not suggesting that creative writing instructors should unthinkingly adopt the orthodoxy that suggest writers have to be performers, but we do maintain that it is critical to encourage creative writing students to explore, reflect on and critically interrogate the shifts in literary culture that have produced this performativity, and to give them vital exposure to debate, argumentation and public speaking. While the creative
writing curriculum will rightly retain its focus on discipline-specific questions of writerly craft and technique, these complementary oral argumentation skills are more important than ever for creative writing graduates, because they respond to the changing nature of the literary landscape and the increasingly performative dimensions of authorship. Yet they are also valuable transferable skills that ensure greater graduate employability for creative writing students across a diverse range of graduate destinations. We believe it is imperative that creative writing curricula adapt to prepare students for their future careers as writers on the literary stage, connecting them to a network of ideas and peers that are integral to their future success.

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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