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Writing before it was all Shakespeare

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Simon Bell worked in book publishing editorial and design before teaching at Coventry University in 1996, where he has taught on Craft, Fashion, Fine Art, Graphic Design, Illustration, Foundation and postgraduate courses. He specialises in written work and contextual studies, but also teaches studio work in print and multimedia. He has an MA in English Literature and his PhD is entitled 'The promise of the short text: writing risk into visual arts practice'. His research interest is critical and creative multimodal writing, in particular short texts and the interplay between constraint and expression. He has published and presented in this and other areas, and is engaged in a range of related projects in addition to his teaching duties.

Abstract

In this paper I argue that short and carefully structured essays can foster risk if they blend unfamiliar format with proper content demand. Students were given a s□□□□□ with 16 lines and 128 words and were asked to rewrite it into an eristic essay of the same format. The project's theoretical basis was short stories' use of scale, suggestion, openers, repeats, subversion; risk; academic writing; reader response. A lot of the essays were daring and different. Interviews showed that some students enjoyed autonomy and risk. But risk is safe if it is safely set into courses. The paper concludes that it is risky to think you empower students by giving them power: they should take it, and not be given it.

Writing before it was all Shakespeare

This paper outlines my 128-word essay project which, in common with current initiatives such as Writing-PAD, aimed to connect visual arts students' writing with their practice. The students were on a Coventry University (UK) Foundation Art and Design course, which is a one-year, pre-degree diagnostic 'preparatory experience' (Coventry University 2011). A control group from the same cohort was given a conventional 1,000-word essay (asking the same questions as the 128-word version). Both groups of students were asked to do a creative presentation of their own work after the essay. Although the 128-word essay writers did discernibly (but only marginally) better presentations than their 1,000-word counterparts,

their presentations were not as relatively innovative as were most of their 128-word essays. It might thus be unwise to credit the 128-word essay as an *agent* of innovation.

It might also be unwise to make assumptions about visual arts students' attitudes to writing. For example, 62.5% (20 out of 32) of a group of Coventry University 2011-12 Graphic Design final year undergraduates thought that they should be 'encouraged to write', although 20% of that 62.5% (4 out of 20) admitted that they found writing 'deadly boring', suggesting that this sub-group saw some usefulness in writing – as perhaps career-based, perhaps intellectually stimulating, perhaps self-improving, perhaps vague usefulness – and 96% (106 out of 110) Graphic Design and Illustration undergraduates chose the dissertation instead of the freer, reflective practice logbook when they had the option in 2007-08. Many cited the dissertation's status and challenge as their reasons for choice, and in the 2010 Graphic Design course review process the students requested the reinstatement of the dissertation (which had been removed by institutional policy), providing an interesting example of student power working to restore a tradition.

I became interested in short texts through my experience in book publishing, where I often had to meld text and image into specific spaces. My short essay teaching began with 50-150 word texts, prompted by multimodal writing (where space and time are players – for example, websites and posters) and the short story. The short story is relevant because of contemporary interest in flash- and micro-fiction (Hawthorn 2001, Rourke 2011) and because of the constraints of social media and SMS writing. The short story can be delimited in engagingly different ways – by length (Hawthorn 2001), by time (Poe, in Hawthorn 2001), by performance (Hershman 2009) and by form (Gray 1992). The short story is also relevant because of its subversive defiance (Miall 1989, Renshawe 1998, Rourke 2011) and its call on reader-connivance and provisional meaning (Bayley 1988, Hanson 1989, Mort 2011). Bayley also places the formal perfection and the definitive meaning of the short story on opposite ends of a sliding scale, and these factors, together with vague language – championed as useful, popular and anti-élitist (Channell 1994) – help to produce an anti-institutional package which deviates from established academic registers and expected clarity of meaning.

The title of this paper – '**writing before it was all Shakespeare**' – is taken from one of my student's responses and is apt because it can be read in two ways depending on pauses: 'writing: before it was all Shakespeare' (and now it's something else, with ambiguous

dating), and ‘writing *before* it was all Shakespeare’ (the writing before Shakespeare came to dominate, with more definite dating). There might be ambiguity about which of the two meanings is intended because each is equally plausible. Perfect poise between the two, James’s ‘inextinguishable’ hovering (1881), might be subversive in its adroit sloughing-off of interpretive responsibility. The short story / essay is not an easy option: reluctant writers might have fewer words to grind out, but they have to get the words to ‘multi-task’ (Cracknell 2011). Adroit poise might be criticised as wasted effort if it is thought to be used in an inappropriate, perhaps lazily, disingenuous, vague (but annoyingly effective) way, and it thus cranks up the subversion.

In this paper I very briefly highlight the characteristics of six 128-word essays, amongst others an emphasis on form, use of short story techniques, reader-involvement and authorial abdication – *not* features generally celebrated in conventional essays. In this respect, the essays offered students the power – or at least the opportunity – to subvert existing mores. I also briefly analyse six exchanges from interviews I subsequently did with students from the same group and which show autonomy, awareness of form, loose-limbed approaches to creativity, reader-focus, provisional meaning, risk-taking and risk-avoidance.

Risk-avoidance could be more daring and quietly subversive than risk-taking because of the emphasis placed on risk in the visual arts by practitioners (Barnbrook 1998, Roberts and Wright 2010, Robinson 2011), by institutions (Cardiff Metropolitan University 2011, Coventry University 2010), and by bodies such as the Quality Assurance Agency (2008). The paradox is that once risk becomes sanctioned it becomes safe. Risk-avoidance then effectively becomes risk-taking, and perhaps the most daring creative practitioners are those who resolutely play straight when urged not to do so. Risk and experimentation would thus be hoisted out of the realm of absolutes of form and into that of attitude and resistance. This would make what is materially produced by these students immaterial, perhaps the ultimate act of defiance in an environment devoted to the plastic arts.

There were four separate essay briefs, broadly reflecting Foundation students’ interests in fine arts, graphics, fashion and industrial design. The students were allowed to choose whichever brief they wanted; they had two weeks to complete the work. Each brief had the same layout, and each brief asked students to argue one of two opposing viewpoints (Figures 1, 2, 3 and 4). The text block was based on an article about insects, and I manipulated the

wording to get justification and word-spacing as perfect as possible in a square of the column width of a three-column Microsoft Word layout. A quota of 128 words was the arbitrary result of this, and students were asked to do whatever it took to get their content into the text block. No concessions were made for shortness, and seminars discussed content in terms of a full-length essay.

This selection of essays demonstrates their variety. Some emphasise the overall look and shape (Figures 5, 6 and 8), and others plasticity (Figure 5). There is rhythm and reverberation in Figures 5, 6 and 10; there is authorial authority (Figure 5) as well as authorial abdication, sometimes in the same essay (Figures 5, 7 and 9, in which the capitals emphasise but also help secure the fit). The reader is embroiled (Figures 8, 9 and 10), and the reader is challenged, sometimes in the same essay (Figures 5, 9 and 10). Grammar, syntax and linear conventions are also challenged in Figures 9 and 10, and there is editorial virtuosity balanced by savvy sampling in Figure 7. Fact weaves in and out of fiction in Figure 6; there is visual, oral and aural interplay in Figures 5, 6 and 8. Some essays mix the personal with hard fact (Figure 5, a setting out of responses to a questionnaire), some show adroit pacing (Figure 7), some emphasise sheer content (Figure 8), others call on the rhetorical (Figure 9). Some deploy creditable short story formal techniques in the way they handle openers (Figures 5 and 7) and repeats (Figures 5, 6, 7 and 8).

The interview fragments (I am 'SB') demonstrate that the essay was definitely a challenge (Figure 11), although in this same response 'unique' is ambiguous because to be unique is not always a good thing, and there might have been a degree of understated irony in this response. Some students did acknowledge a connection between the essay and their practice (Figures 12, 14 and 16). The essay's implicit challenge was understood and articulated, as was a definitive understanding of creativity (Figure 13). This understanding is personal and confident, and atypical of visual arts students' ideas of creativity (in my experience) because it encompasses an imaginative way of achieving a measurable result, and is neither vague nor unfeasibly aspirational. This response also showed an understanding of creative writing that was not rooted in the literary, as I have found it to be in many of my visual arts students. For some, the project's shortness was a welcome break from conventional essay writing (Figure 14); this also showed an awareness and acceptance of the reader. Reader-response is even more evident in Figure 15, where any worries about the risks of ambiguous meaning are

confidently brushed aside whilst offering a way to handle them. This response also shows clear linking of form, content and intent.

The true skill and risk when using ambiguity lies not in creating *differently* ambiguous meanings but in creating *equally* ambiguous ones. This gives readers a true conundrum: ‘what are we supposed to think?’ The formal poise supports this with a degree of confident swagger, because disentangling sense from sense is harder than disentangling sense from nonsense. However, because the short essay was so different to these students’ previous academic writing, and had such self-conscious and contrived constraints, the risk and autonomy it threw up might not be able to transcend it. This was apparent in the presentations after the essays. As a self-contained project, the short essay had undoubted qualities but the trick is applying these qualities to other work where they can *continue* to be effective. It is paradoxical – but true – to argue that the most radical of the 128-word essays might be the most conservative: at least they would be different and not playing to the gallery.

The essays’ risk *might* be best seen in a longer essay. The short essay betrays no hinterland, so tutors can only infer reading and research. The short essay is not quicker to mark than conventional essays 10 times longer which, because of their ‘peculiarly “schooled”’ nature (Mitchell and Evison 2006), which tends to legitimise tutors to expect certain forms of meaning. These short essays need reading and rereading as one gropes for meaning, more aware than in conventional essays that one might miss the point and be a victim of one’s own cleverness.

In this respect the project’s location in art and design does not quarantine its message: power *was* effectively transferred to the students who took the baton on offer because staff might have found themselves less sure of their ground than before, and thus needed to pass it on. However, none of the control group students doing the 1,000-word essay attempted anything out of the ordinary (which would have been radical), and so whether 128-word empowerment is true empowerment must be questioned. Some students took an opportunity on offer, none took one *not* on offer.

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Please send everything below in a separate document to everything above for the publisher

<p>Foundation Studies with [redacted]</p> <p>Autumn Term, 2011 Room [redacted]</p> <p>My name is</p> <p>and the list of my research (bibliography) is on the second sheet of this essay.</p> <p>Email both pages of this essay back to [redacted] via Moodle as a Microsoft Word attachment so it can be run through Turnitin.</p> <p><i>Launch Lecture, Wednesday 9 November Deadline 5.00 pm, Wednesday 23 November</i></p> 	<p>What you have to do</p> <p>The two pictures below are both of the actress Marilyn Monroe and are both from around 1962.</p> <p>On the left is a commercial Time/Life photo, on the right one of Andy Warhol's fine art images.</p> <p>★ <i>Is Warhol really any good? Isn't he just an opportunist, who has taken someone else's work and adapted it without being really original? Isn't his work crude, obvious and easy, a copy?</i></p> <p>★ <i>Or did he have real talent? Did he have something to say, a spot-on commentary on his time? And is his work more accomplished than it seems at first sight? Is he unique? If so, why?</i></p> <p>Which of these arguments is better, and why?</p> <p><u>Marilyn Monroe Time / Life and Andy Warhol</u></p> <p>Scientists have now finally agreed that so-called burying beetles coat their young ones' food with an antibacterial substance which guarantees their survival. These burying beetles lay their eggs on the carcasses of small animals, such as birds and rodents. Research today shows that without the microbial secretions, the young will fail to gain weight and die. The results were presented at the 59th Congress of the Pan-European Society for Evolutionary Biology. Nearly all animals will do the best for their young, but burying beetles, in the genus <i>Nicrophorus</i> (which are to be found in the temperate regions of South America, Europe, Africa and all of Australia) are doting parents. Beetles lay their eggs in the flesh of the animal and wait to welcome their young into this world!</p>	<p>How you have to do it</p> <p>Like the original text below, your essay must be exactly 128 words long, and must make exactly 16 lines in 11 pt. Times.</p> <p>Keep the <u>underlined heading</u> and the pictures, but replace the beetles text with your essay. This should be a justified block, with tight, even word spaces and no hyphenated words at line ends.</p> <p>You will have to choose your words carefully to make them all fit properly. Every word counts in an essay like this. You must know your subject.</p> <p>You could decide to abandon conventional grammar. You may want to try creative writing.</p> <p>Just remember to do what the essay asks</p> 
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Figure 1

<p>Foundation Studies with [redacted]</p> <p>Autumn Term, 2011 Room [redacted]</p> <p>My name is</p> <p>and the list of my research (bibliography) is on the second sheet of this essay.</p> <p>Email both pages of this essay back to [redacted] via Moodle as a Microsoft Word attachment so it can be run through Turnitin.</p> <p><i>Launch Lecture, Wednesday 9 November Deadline 5.00 pm, Wednesday 23 November</i></p> 	<p>What you have to do</p> <p>Both the two pictures below are the logos of contemporary, recognisable American brands.</p> <p>On the left is that of Apple computers, and on the right that of Starbucks chain of coffee bars.</p> <p>★ <i>Surely Apple's logo is absolutely right for 2011...nice and simple, graphic and strong? Shouldn't all logos be uncomplicated, and recognisable anywhere, without lettering?</i></p> <p>★ <i>But why not have a fussier logo? And isn't Starbucks logo just as recognisable, even if it is busier and more old-fashioned than Apple's? And why should all graphic design be simple?</i></p> <p>Which of these arguments is better, and why?</p> <p><u>Logos Apple Computers and Starbucks Coffee</u></p> <p>Scientists have now finally agreed that so-called burying beetles coat their young ones' food with an antibacterial substance which guarantees their survival. These burying beetles lay their eggs on the carcasses of small animals, such as birds and rodents. Research today shows that without the microbial secretions, the young will fail to gain weight and die. The results were presented at the 59th Congress of the Pan-European Society for Evolutionary Biology. Nearly all animals will do the best for their young, but burying beetles, in the genus <i>Nicrophorus</i> (which are to be found in the temperate regions of South America, Europe, Africa and all of Australia) are doting parents. Beetles lay their eggs in the flesh of the animal and wait to welcome their young into this world!</p>	<p>How you have to do it</p> <p>Like the original text below, your essay must be exactly 128 words long, and must make exactly 16 lines in 11 pt. Times.</p> <p>Keep the <u>underlined heading</u> and the pictures, but replace the beetles text with your essay. This should be a justified block, with tight, even word spaces and no hyphenated words at line ends.</p> <p>You will have to choose your words carefully to make them all fit properly. Every word counts in an essay like this. You must know your subject.</p> <p>You could decide to abandon conventional grammar. You may want to try creative writing.</p> <p>Just remember to do what the essay asks</p> 
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Figure 2

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Figure 3

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Figure 4

Brogues Traditional men's and new-look girls'

No/ Yes/ No/ No...They're classic for both sexes
...Yes/ No/ No/ Yes/ No/ No/ No/ No/ No/ Yes/
No/ No...Women need release using trend...No/ No/
No/ Yes/ No...The style's changed...No/ No/ No/
Yes/ Yes/ No/ Yes/ Yes...It's clichéd...No/ Yes/
Yes/ Yes/ Yes/ No/ No/ No/ Yes/ Yes/ No/ No/
No/ Yes/ No/ No/ No...They're popular, what's the
problem?... Yes/ No/ No/ No/ Yes/ No/ No/ No/
Yes/ Yes/ Yes/ Yes/ No/ Yes/ No/ No/ No/ Yes/
No/ No/ No/ Yes/ No/ No/ No/ Yes...Altering takes
least effort...No/ No/Yes/ No/ No/ Yes/ Yes/ No/
Yes/ No/ Yes/ No/ No/ No/ No/ No/ Yes...The
manly look's a tough statement...Yes/ Yes/ No/ No/
No/ Yes/ Yes/ No/ No/ No. The top dispute's the
second as women are seeking parity to men.

Figure 5

Brogues Traditional men's and new-look girls'

Clip-clop. Go the shoes. Dowdy and worn down to the soles due to extensive use, the owner passes children and adults in a kind of trance - having only precise business in mind. She has only business in mind. The finest clothing made is a person's skin, but, of course, society demands relatively more than this. They get trampled, get run down, jump and move pigeon footed, they are us, and they are more of an addition of us than any other shape of clothing. Brogues aren't just a model of men's shoes, they are men's shoes – and this is the art and the arguments that make women acquire them. Women are rising to command - the shoes were just one measure towards women peeing standing up.

Figure 6

Marilyn Monroe Time / Life and Andy Warhol

Fragment of Dialogue selected from Factory Girl featuring Edie Sedgwick with a particular singer. Why are all of these individuals going to spend a fortune on a soup can? You simply have to look further than the understandable, you understand? Am I unintelligent? I don't understand this, am I unintelligent? You're being a little unintelligent, don't you consider it intriguing, if not just a little smidgen? You understand it might merely be a painting, it's also a brainwave, and its the bloke establishing the brainwave who's stimulating. I believe this fella has his priorities all messed up, the entire planets smoldering up and this bloke's making divinities out of garbage. Justifiably the whole planet may be smoldering up but that doesn't suggest that we ought to be pessimistic!

Figure 7

Marilyn Monroe Time / Life and Andy Warhol

"I love Hollywood, they are beautiful, everybody is plastic, I want to be plastic!" Money and fame, these re what his life was all about! Warhol could always predict what would be commercial and an expert in creating pop art. His subjects?? Popular culture, objects and celebrities! Things the public met in their everyday lives. No-thing inventive!! All the above, combined with the easy techniques he used i.e. silkscreening are resulting in public's view that he was audacious and sarcastic but they also recognized his innovativeness. Many people, believe his works had something to say while, he declared his works were about nothing & that the best art is good business. Personally, I believe, he had a profound business mind, capable to recycle & manufacture everything and e-v-e-r-y-b-o-d-y!

Figure 8

Brogues Traditional men's and new-look girls'

To a certain extent, everything that has been done, has been done before. But to mimic a design like men's brogues for a woman, Crazy! IS fashion made up of lazy designers, incapable of creating anything new? Or at the very least, different? John Galliano, arguably the most high rank designer of our time, WITHOUT dressing women as men. Nobody can call him dull. HOT to wear these ABOMINATIONS, I don't think so! Want male attention for the wrong reason lady? Wearing these shoes does NOT make you seem more intellectual, but rather the opposite. Bluestocking? Use what god gave you to climb the ranks! Would you be attracted to a man in a DRESS? Why be masculine, intersex and A TRANNY? Think first, BE CLEVER, BE FEM.

Figure 9

Marilyn Monroe Time / Life and Andy Warhol

Warhol's artistic value: 'Had no real point to make', 'Can't I be non-original' (Andy Warhol). Thoughts on Warhol: 'He preceded us' 'strange fascination' used as- 'lack of expression, intended to disguise interest and engagement'; 'totally modern'; 'representation as the main function of art'. Is this the true value of art? How is art valued? A faulty copy of a perfect copy is empty (Plato); Tasteful yet soulless (Kant); Art from science: talent from knowledge (Kant); Art valued by longevity (Savile); Art needs skill, meaning, dependant on era. Warhol is a third copy, it has no direct soul, the work he generates has no skill- silk screen print is easy produced/ imitated. Traditional value of art and the value of Warhol arent equal. Yet his work is still admired.

Figure 10

Response Unique.

SB Unique in what way then?

Response Well I've never had an essay where I have to do exactly a certain number of words, it's always been no more than so and so or at least this many, never exactly 128- and then the 16-line restriction and the margins stay the same so it was an interesting challenge.

Figure 11

SB Do you think that you found out more about fashion from doing this or do you think you found out more about writing?

Response I think I learnt both because writing I kind of found out that I don't need to like waffle on, I can just do a really short essay and I think because I wrote it in such a different way, people would look at it.

Figure 14

SB You did quite an unusual essay. Why did you do that?

Response Well I thought because the essay was like based on fashion [...] I thought that fashion is more dependent on like the public. I thought if I asked everyone then they would decide if it was [ok] or not.

Figure 12

SB So there's something in here which is going to make people wonder why you've done what you've done?

Response Yeah I think rather than just like reading a load of text that exactly explains everything.

SB So you don't think this exactly explains everything?

Response I think people would have to question me to understand it fully.

Figure 15

SB Did you enjoy doing it that short or would you rather have written a long one?

Response No I prefer to write short, it's creative. I don't like writing too long.

SB In what way was it more creative?

Response Because you had to like really think about how to get all the points across in the exact square.

Figure 13

Response Yes [...] writing before it was all Shakespeare. Once I'd done [the essay] the 128 words it really hit me that it is, in my sketch book when I'm writing stuff using different words I could explain whatever it is I'm doing better, more clearly.

SB Because of doing this?

Response Yeah definitely.

Figure 16