The Participatory Researchers' Creative Writing Toolkit.

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Welcome

Welcome to this creative writing toolkit, an open educational resource designed by a participatory research team made up of students, librarians and academics. We adopted these creative writing activities in a project called the Creative Library, specifically in creative writing workshops in the University of Sheffield Library's Digital Commons, where we collaboratively explored librarian and student perceptions of artificial intelligence (AI).

Creative writing is beneficial to participatory research projects because it produces engaging, accessible outputs and promotes empathy with other experiences of life and enables research with participants (Leavy, 2016; Phillips and Kara, 2021). It allows for connection with embodied and affective dimensions of experience, often neglected in academic research. It can prompt us to critically imagine alternative futures (Lupton and Watson, 2022). Adopting creative writing promotes a pluralistic view of the world and can enhance diversity and inclusion, as the following Student Facilitator reflections demonstrate: "thinking creatively made sure the writing techniques were accessible to all people, we freely accepted different writing styles and storyline progressions so there was a lot of writing diversity … creative writing took down the barrier of feeling as if 'I don't have enough knowledge'."

In adopting creative writing as a participatory method we were also influenced by speculative methods in education (Ross, 2023) and design fictions, the participatory creation of imaginary technologies which challenge current expectations and social arrangements (Tanenbaum, 2014).

In our study we were researching responses to Artificial Intelligence in education. As there has been much interplay between scientists and creative writers and film makers in speculative fiction imagining AI there was a good fit between the method and the topic.

Workshop design

Three hours is a good length of time for creative writing workshops. Consider adopting a range of connecting, reading, writing and sharing activities adapted from creative writing pedagogy.

Connecting to build community. Include an introduction to the workshop and a connecting activity to build the collaboration.

Reading and discussing classic works to learn writing techniques.

Writing to prompt people to write and get past the blank page.

Sharing writing for group discussion (known as "workshopping" in creative writing).

Tips on the workshop design

"Allowing participants to use either pen and paper or a laptop giving them the freedom to produce their stories whichever way they wanted to." **Student Facilitator.**

Adapt these techniques. In one workshop we took a more scaffolded approach, with greater emphasis on providing starting points such as a reading or story opening to complete. In another we took a less scaffolded, more open ended approach, including the picture prompt exercise, detailed in activity five.Provide guidance to steer how the interaction occurs, such as allowing readers to comment without responding. **Academic Facilitator.**

Connecting activities we have used include name stories, collage and crafting. Seating participants at a circular table enables conversations to develop naturally and gives quieter students the opportunity to immediately participate in a task, until they feel comfortable to speak. **Librarian Facilitator.**

Reflection on writing activities

"the wide variety of [creative writing activities …] gave participants many opportunities to generate content and further explore their thoughts ... If they did not connect with a certain exercise, they had … more opportunities to create something that they felt represented their thoughts and opinions." **Student Facilitator.**

Reflections on the workshop design

"Discussion after each activity was really helpful, [it] allowed for critical dialogue and room for debate. It was a really important element of the workshop as it allowed us to share our thoughts and perspectives and develop our own ideas from each other."

Librarian Facilitator. "Having collaborative dialogue sessions allowed for people to be critical on concepts and to share different perspectives and viewpoints." **Student Facilitator.** "Sharing the writing was important as a communal experience." **PhD Student Facilitator.** "The conversation between each exercise was very beneficial, as it provided an additional avenue for participants to unpack their perceptions and how these coloured their narratives." **Student Facilitator.**

Writing activities

Activity one: The story prompt

Participants read an extract of a story and then discuss it in a group, before writing in response to these questions:

What is your overall response to the story extract?

What would it feel like to be in this story?

Does the story enable you to think differently about a topic?

Do you think it is well written as a story?

Notes on activity one

The story we chose was Luckin and Holmes' (2017) story "AI Is the New TA in the Classroom: Machine intelligence will have an increasingly prominent role in the classrooms of tomorrow". It captures one vision of AI in learning written by two leading AI researchers.

Activity two: Heroes and villains

Design your hero/ine or villain! This exercise was based on the Proust questions which are a series of prompts intended to help you design a character in a story:

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Proust_Questionnaire

Reflection on activity two

"Character prompt activity was enjoyable but also overwhelming as there were a lot of questions. Interesting to see the difference in answer lengths between participants. Some found it harder to creatively write extensive amounts this way." **Librarian Facilitator.**

Activity three: Story continuation

Participants are asked to continue the opening of a story using an open ended prompt.

Notes on activity three

Our examples were: 1/ Sitting in their room in halls, Alex is battling procrastination. It's time to get down to work. The deadline is looming. They call up their AI …2/ I am a little late on the campus and slip in at the back of the classroom. Jo is there and makes room for me next to them. It is the AI presenting, with the tutor sitting in the front row, as usual …

Reflection on activity three

"This approach set up one premise for everyone but allowed it to go in any direction. They could take different approaches towards the same problem.**" Student Facilitator.**

Activity four: What if?

The good thing about stories is that we can imagine things that are not possible now or perhaps ever…

Step 1 Think about a big problem you would like to solve, for example inequality in access to education globally or lack of personalised support for learning.

Step 2 Imagine a solution to this problem.

Step 3 Write a short scene from your future world.

Reflection on activity four

"This activity was revealing about the key issues that participants thought most important.**" Academic Facilitator.**

Activity five: Picture exercise

Write a story inspired by an image. Participants themselves had suggested images at an earlier stage in the design process. We tried to avoid cliched images of AI and included many images that had no direct connection to the topic.

Tip: Adopt participatory methods to collaboratively generate a collection of images as part of the workshop planning.

Reflections on activity five

"Activities with a prompt (like the picture prompt) seemed to be most successful. Writing from the same prompt allowed us to see how varied ideas and approaches are." **Librarian Facilitator.**

"Visually stimulating aids in the form of pictures provided a good starting point for participants to gain inspiration for their creative writing." **Student Facilitator.**

"The image task seemed the most mind opening. That experience of discovering what you think … Sometimes the images that had least obvious connection to AI produced the most creative responses". **Academic Facilitator.**

Activity six: A day in the life

Write a story of a day in the life of …

Our example was a day in the life of a student at the AI university.

Reflections on activity six

"Day in the life allowed for a more focused approach to writing." **Student Facilitator.**

"Day in the life picks up small details." **PhD Student Facilitator.**

Collaborative analysis

Consider how you will involve participants in reflections and analysis. We held a workshop to reflect on what we had learned about views of AI and about using creative writing methods as a research process. After the workshop we asked facilitators to complete the following tasks:

- Choose one text, not your own and highlight what draws you to this story. Select quotes. What are the benefits and problems [of AI] in this story?
- What worked well with the workshop activities and what were the challenges?
- Describe the workshops in a word or a phrase.
- How did your prior knowledge [of AI] influence what you wrote?
- To what extent did the workshops feel like a space where you could write and share freely?
- What modifications would you make if we ran the workshops again?

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For more information on the Creative Library visit our website: https://sites.google.com/sheffield.ac.uk/thecreativelibrary/welcome

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