



WCES-2011

## Gendered choices: constructions of e-portfolios in the creative writing classroom

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### Abstract

The incorporation of e-methods in the creative writing classroom is an innovative way of encouraging technology-savvy students to apply their skills in producing literary works. Students utilize the e-portfolio to archive their creative works. The homepages and blogs within the system offer students a platform for self-narratives. Findings of an action research conducted to review and evaluate the effectiveness of e-portfolio application in creative writing also disclose the gendering process that has gone into the construction of students' works. In this paper, we probe into selected e-portfolios and examine concrete poems that students have composed to divulge their concerns with gender issues and the ambivalence of their gendered choices.

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*Keywords:* creative writing, e-portfolios, gender; ambivalence;

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### 1. Introduction

Students today grow up in a world that is shaped by the World Wide Web and advances in computer technology. For instance, their concept of playing games has moved from the outdoor fields to now occupying the screens of desktop monitors and laptops. Even reading has not escaped the influence and novelty of e-technology, and many books have gone the e-way. Our students are preoccupied with their electronic gadgets; their smart phones do more than make phone calls and take pictures. Games, e-books, calendars, schedulers and drawings are some of the thousands of applications provided for users of the various smart phones and lap tops currently in the market. The traditional pen and paper method may have less appeal to these students who are fascinated with electronic innovations. It would seem appropriate to make use of this allure of technology. Thus, the incorporation of e-methods in the creative writing classroom is the educators' way of encouraging students who are technology-savvy to apply their skills in the production of literary works.

This paper focuses on the findings of an action research that is conducted to review and evaluate the effectiveness of e-portfolio application in creative writing; interestingly, our analysis of the data also discloses the gendering process involved in the construction of students' creative works. In this paper, we probe into selected e-portfolios (<http://www.myeport.com/>) and examine concrete poems that students have composed and designed using drawing

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and designing software. They are encouraged to describe the various stages undertaken in the production process in blog entries, and the completed poems are then published in their e-portfolios. By examining these poems as well as their personal ruminations, we divulge the students' concerns with gender issues and the ambivalence of their gendered choices.

## 2. E-Portfolios in the Creative Writing Classroom

This is a third-year course for students doing an undergraduate degree in Literature in English at Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia. In this creative writing class, e-Methods in Literary Production, they participate as a writing community in a multi-media laboratory where they utilize the computer and the Internet. Designed as a writing workshop, students are introduced to creative writing, specifically poetry and short story genres; they are involved in writing and editing sessions, applying creative writing techniques, skills in editing and criticism, technical presentation skills and paying attention to the processes involved in writing and publication. At the end of the course, the learning objectives are as follows: “students apply literary knowledge and skills to produce original creative pieces; students compose creative texts by integrating computer and technological programs; they create multimedia presentations as well as design a blog and produce an e-portfolio of their creative writing” (Noraini Md Yusof, 2008). The creative works composed are then transformed into posters, greeting cards, e-storyboards, jpeg files or multimedia presentations. At the moment, four cohorts of students have successfully completed the requirements of the course.

The use of e-portfolios in learning and teaching has been found to be beneficial:

*It is part of a personal online space, where learners can store their work, record their achievements and access personal course timetables. This space can provide digital resources relevant to a learner's own study (personalised information) and links to other learners (for collaboration and feedback). E-portfolios benefit learning most effectively when considered as part of a system, rather than as a discrete entity. The system should include online repositories, planning and communication tools, and opportunities for both students and teachers to draw out and present e-portfolios at particular times and for particular purposes (Hartnell-Young et al 2007).*

In this course, students are trained to utilize the e-portfolio as a means to archive their collection of creative works in the form of inputted texts and electronic files such as Word and PDF files, images, multi-media and blog entries. They are encouraged to write blog entries as often as possible and to share the production process of their literary compositions with the class. An action research was conducted in 2009 to review and evaluate the effectiveness of e-portfolio application in creative writing, and our analysis reveal that the homepages and blogs within the system offer students a platform to voice their concerns through self-narratives as well as original creative pieces (Noraini Md Yusof et al. 2009). Interestingly, the results also disclose the gendering process involved in the construction of students' creative works.

## 3. Gendering Process in Literary Productions

Gender is an important aspect of identity, besides others which are characterized in terms of interpersonal characteristics, which may include self definition or personal traits, roles and relationships, personal values or moral beliefs (Calvert, 2002). When a child reaches puberty, the sense of continuity of his or her self images over time is disrupted by radical alterations in physical appearance (Grotevant, 1998; Huffaker and Calvert, 2005). Sexual maturation brings about changes in the roles that one is expected to assume with someone of the opposite sex; the adolescent is increasingly expected to assume a sexual identity, which is one of the markers and anchors of a mature identity (Grotevant, 1998; Huffaker and Calvert, 2005). During this phase and post-adolescence, sexual orientation or identity and love relationships between boyfriends/girlfriends or crushes become concerns that are pertinent. These are factors that influence our students' final creative products and ultimately are transformed into issues that are addressed.

Gender play is not uncommon during this phase. Majority of these students chose features that illustrate their sexual identity when designing their homepages. For instance, the stereotypical use of colours and images depicting a particular aspect of gender is rampant (femininity: pastel shades of pink, red, blue and green as well as images of

flowers, soft toys, love patterns and girly objects such as handbag, shoes and make-up; masculinity: solid shades of black, blue, brown and earth-tone red as well as images of sports and outdoor activities and guy toys). However, there are instances when their homepage names and blogs reveal the fluidity of gender choices when students switch from being male to female (or vice versa). The gendering process that goes into the construction of students' blog identities is influenced by the 'anonymity' of on-line environments; the invisibility of the blog space gives the students more flexibility to explore their identities through the personae they have assumed. Two instances reveal this fluidity in the reconstructed identities: a male student assumes the identity of Allan Sue while a female takes on Tommy Love. However, although the blog identity selected may be contrary to their biological gender, the issues covered in their blog entries and creative works are reflective of their concerns as male and female students on campus. For example, in the excerpt below, Tommy Love reveals to her site readers her true identity as a female and her passion for her car, not because of its speed or shape but for the memories linked with it:

*Hello, welcome to my site. My name is Tommy..Tommy Love. But the name written on my identity certificate was Norfaizah Ismail. Anyway, just call me Tommy for short. I love [my car] so much since that is the memory of my late father and mother. That was the car that we used to drive and went shopping, holiday... and that was also the car that helped to bring my mother to the hospital when she was so sick. That's the car my father used to send me to my hostel. And now, even they both are not anymore here in this world, the car still can be used by me to help me with my campus life. I love this car so much and will never let it go. I'll keep it with me forever... since it has so much memory of my late Abah and Ummi. (Norfaizah Ismail 2007).*

#### 4. The Corpus: Poetry in Virtual Space

To discuss the gendering process involved in the production of students' creative works, we analyze three concrete poems published in their e-portfolios. The first is by a female student entitled "Secret Beauty" (Siti Zulaiha Bassaro, 2009). The image constructed shows the student's fascination with good looks and cosmetics. Her poem takes on the shape of a blusher brush poised for application on a woman's cheeks. It is interesting that though the face has the high cheekbone that is synonymous with one of the universal aspects of feminine beauty, it is disembodied. The face is partial; half of the visage is absent. This image presents an ambiguous aspect of beauty. It is seemingly hinting at the presence, or rather non-presence, of other factors that determine beauty besides cosmetics. Lines of the poem suggest this ambiguity: "*Fall in love with makeup as makeup beautifies you / Feel the magic of makeup as if there is no regret in you / But there is something you should wake up to / true beauty is still deep within you.*"



Figure1. Concrete Poem: Secret Beauty

It appears at first glance that the student conforms to popular and stereotypical constructions of gender when she opens for what seems to be a feminine item as the subject of her poem. However, a closer study reveals the ambiguity in her perception of beauty; there is more to beauty than what is presented on the face. The beautiful image on the face is painted on; the beautiful image deep within requires no artificial add-ons.

In the second poem, “My Passion”, the student writes about the allure of the stilettos. She pays tribute to its sensuous lines:

*They make me tall / they make me gorgeous / they make me move confidently / they complement my step / they protect my feet / they drive me crazy (Norhayati Abdul Aziz, 2009).*

Similar to the first, this poem also deals with a young woman’s preoccupation with aspects of beauty. In this case, her subjectivity as a young woman is linked to what the stiletto does to boost her sense of confidence. Shoes are her passion. The lines of the poem outline the sleek shape of the stiletto. Interestingly, the shoe that is glorified is not complete; its pair is missing. The fact that all the shoes in the background are also missing their pairs hints at the ambiguous nature of her attitude towards the stiletto. Figure 2 displays the poem:



Figure2. Concrete Poem: My Passion

The last poem, “Pestle and Mortar” (Nurul Atiqah Amran, 2009), addresses the dilemma faced by a young woman in having to make choices. Her mother’s advice leads to her having to conform to what society expects from a woman, a wife and a mother. Cooking identifies the woman, as the mother speaks to the daughter, “*You’ll never make a / good wife if you don’t know how to cook.*” The poem takes on the shape of a mortar and pestle, two objects fundamental to a Malaysian kitchen. Her mother’s awareness of the essentials of her daughter’s education is still secondary to the skills she requires in the kitchen: “*You must have a brain, but / spare the time to learn how to / manage your household because / That is your kingdom.*”



Figure3. Concrete Poem: Pestle and Mortar

The ambiguity of what is expected and what is wanted is subtle in these lines. The mother's expectations are reflective of those of her generation. However, one is still left questioning what the daughter's decision will be.

The students' creative works presented here exhibit the ways in which they blend images with words. More importantly, they demonstrate their constructions of the gendered selves as they negotiate traditional notions of femininity with modern demands of their raised levels of educational attainment and social expectations. While they return to traditional images of beauty - cosmetics, shoes, and domestic responsibilities - they however destabilize these symbols and view them from the perspectives of modern Malaysian women who challenge customary and established roles and norms. As women with agency, they do not accept these conventions so easily. There is definitely a shift in their perceptions of gender constructions.

## 5. Conclusion

By examining the poems and personal ruminations in this creative writing classroom, we divulge the students' concerns with gender issues and the ambivalence of their gendered choices. The gendering process is inherent in the constructions of creative texts and even the identity of their blog profiles. Analysis of their self-narratives and literary expressions reveal ambivalence in the way gender is perceived. Hence, in this private, yet also public space afforded by the e-portfolio, the creative works disclose the students' perceptions on gendered roles and concerns. Identifying their ambivalence and attributing that ambivalence to social factors (such as social attitudes toward questions of gender) bring to light issues pertaining to gender that are of concern to these students and the implications of such trends on contemporary gendering. While the images and subject matter they have chosen exhibit feminine concerns such as beauty and domestic skills, they, however, subvert our expectations by rejecting stereotypes of gender by deliberately choosing to design disembodied images or to question traditional wisdom. These displays of ambiguity suggest that these young women have the ability to make learned choices of positive gender identities.

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