# Application of E-Learning in Creative Writing

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## ABSTRACT

As e-learning has entered the mainstream, it is important for library professionals to understand the concept and trends in e-learning in different subjects. Such an understanding is necessary to provide effective services to the users. The paper makes an attempt to bring out various aspects of application of e-learning in creative writing. The paper discusses the strengths and limitations of e-learning and the various tools used for e-learning in creative writing. Ten websites on e-learning in creative writing are also discussed.

**Keywords:** E-learning, creative writing, tools for e-learning, wbsites for e-learning

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Today when we are eight years into the 21st century, e-learning is no more a revolutionary concept but a model that has come to stay as the mainstream. As innumerable organisations and universities have adopted e-learning, it has become important for library and information science (LIS) professionals to understand what is e-learning, and be aware of the recent trends in e-learning in different subjects. The aim of the LIS professionals should be to acquaint themselves about opportunities available for e-learning in different subject areas so that they can bring about a qualitative difference in offering new services to their users.

This paper makes an attempt to bring about the various aspects of application of e-learning in creative writing. It explores the strengths and limitations of e-learning and the various tools used for e-learning in creative writing, and lastly the websites on e-learning in creative writing. The purpose of the paper is to acquaint LIS professionals to e-learning in creative writing. This would not only help LIS professionals to improve their information services but may also help them to improve their own writing skills which is needed to develop good library literature.

## 2. WHAT IS E-LEARNING?

In the simple terms, e-learning means education and training through digital media. The digital media could be a computer, a personal digital assistant, a mobile phone, a digital television or any other electronic gadget that could deliver through a network. Network here could mean Internet, LAN, or a corporate WAN. The term e-learning has been defined profusely resulting in a proliferation of definitions. Two definitions that capture the core of this concept in a succinct manner are presented here. According to Education Encyclopedia (StateUniversity.com), the term e-learning refers to any electronically assisted instruction, but is most often associated with instruction offered via computer and the Internet[1].

According to the Glossary-of-Key-Terms of Digital Strategy, e-learning means, learning that is facilitated by the use of digital tools and content. Typically, it involves some form of interactivity, which may include online interaction between the learner and their teacher or peers[2]. Thus, e-learning is basically the use of computers and Internet to facilitate learning. Here the basic concept of learning remains the same only the mode of delivery and presentations differ. Individuals can learn at their own pace and locations through interactive tools that may be synchronous, i.e., in real time or asynchronous, i.e., over a period of time.

Now education is imparted through distance mode in almost all areas of human knowledge. Likewise, e-learning is being successfully applied in creative writing as well. Contextually, it is appropriate to understand the meaning of creative writing.

## 3. WHAT IS CREATIVE WRITING?

According to the article on creative writing in Wikipedia, "Creative writing can technically be considered any writing of original composition that is in no way guilty of plagiarism."[3]

The same article also states that creative writing could be fiction as well as non-fiction writing. It is something more than "normal professional, journalistic, academic, and technical forms"[4] of writing. The article also clarifies that creative writing is a discipline in its own right. It is not an extension of English literature or literature of any other language. In literature as a discipline literary forms are critically studied and it does not teach how to create the literary forms. Creative writing basically encourages the learners to use their imaginations and express their emotions to create written material. Thus creative writing can include any written expression. It can be a novel, short story, drama, play, epic, poetry, lyrics of a song, script for a film, dialogue, writings for children or non-fiction writings like speech, autobiography, biography, historical writings, memoirs, travelogues, etc.

Many argue that individuals are born with creative writing skills, but at the same time it is also widely accepted that creative writing skills can be polished and cultivated. We all have to write for a range of audience for different reasons. The reason decides the topic and the audience the genre. We have to be expressive in whatever we write to achieve our purpose successfully, be it a letter, an argument, an explanation, or a description. Even good fiction writing skills can be consciously cultivated, polished, and perfected. Therefore, many universities conduct formal creative writing programmes. The e-learning revolution has taken creative writing as well into its fold.

### 3.1 Strenghts of E-learning in Creative Writing

Creative writing can be very successfully learnt in the electronic environment due to the use of multimedia content like audio, video, graphics, and text. For instance, learners see a picture, and this visual cue helps them in building a story on it. Many e-learning sites for short stories are using visuals to encourage writing skills. Creative writing is something that people of all ages and from different walks of life like to learn. E-learning in creative writing helps such non-traditional students achieve writing skills. Individuals can choose their own genre to learn and continue it as long as they want and give up when they are satiated or bored. The hypertext environment of e-learning offers the kind of dynamism that is needed to stimulate the imagination essential for creative writing. As collaborative learning is possible in e-learning environment, it helps learners to enhance their creative writing skills through participation. The learners become proactive and search information.

Friedrich Nietzsche, the late 19th century German philosopher used a typewriter to shoot his aphorisms. When he migrated from his longhand to a typewriter, a friend of his noticed a change in his style of writing and expressed his observations to Nietzsche. To this Nietzsche replied, "You are right. Our writing equipment takes part in the forming of our thoughts"[4]. Thus, in the electronic environment the facility of the hyperlinks and the multimedia content has the potency to kindle the human imagination to its dizzy heights.

### 3.2 Limitations of E-learning in Creative Writing

Studies have revealed that the creative writing community does not embrace the information technology readily[5]. Some learners find the technology used in e-learning courses very complicated, which hampers the process of learning. If grappling with the technology is one problem then digital divide is another. Besides, creative writing requires reflection, which the fast pace of electronic environment often fails to provide. Often too much of information in the e-learning courses may hinder the understanding of the learner. As the physical presence of the teacher and the actual classrooms are missing in the e-learning environment, the learner often feels lonely and cut-off from the society. Socialising and the experiences of a physical world are extremely essential in developing creative writing skills.

### 3.3 Tools Used for E-learning in Creative Writing

A variety of virtual communication tools are used for e-learning in creative writing. These tools are of two types: asynchronous and synchronous. Asynchronous tools are used by learners at their own choice of time. The messages or information held by the system are read by the users when they choose to come online unlike synchronous tools, which take place in real time. Synchronous tools are live communication like conversations on the telephone. However, many systems keep a record of such communications. This section briefly discusses the virtual communication tools used for e-learning in creative writing.

#### 3.3.1 E-mails

E-mails are very common and popular way of communication today in the cyber world. It is just like the ordinary letter writing in the physical world.

This simple asynchronous method of exchanging information can be successfully used as an e-learning tool in developing writing skills. Computer technology, especially word processing, has become a vital tool in writing for the students of this generation. Burns in her write up, Improving Student Writing through E-mail Mentoring explains how she succeeded in improving the sentence structure, grammar, and vocabulary of her students through e-mails[6]. She muses that e-mail being a very private space gives the learners a sense of intimacy with the person they correspond. Learners also become reflective and introspective, and feel happy about being read and appreciated.

### 3.3.2 Mailing Lists

Mailing lists, also called discussion lists, are asynchronous method of exchanging communication. It is a process of sending e-mails to a group of people using a listserv. A listserv is a mail server programme that maintains the e-mail addresses of different groups of people who subscribe to it. Listserv copies a message to all the people of group on its mailing list. There are hundreds of mailing lists devoted to creative writing on the Internet. These mailing lists help writers who need guidance from experienced writers. Often self doubts prevent individuals from writing. Mailing lists help shed such inhibitions through discussion and sharing of experiences. Learners can easily communicate with a wide group of experienced writers to sharpen their own writing skills. Also, this networking can take place at learner's own locations and they can easily get their works reviewed through a feedback. There are also separate mailing lists for poems, short stories, novels, children's writings, essays, newspaper articles, etc. Mailing lists give novice writers a platform to share their writing, get comments and encouragement, which is necessary for improving ones writing skills.

### 3.3.3 Newsgroups

Newsgroups are again asynchronous method of communication like mailing lists, enabling communication with a group of like-minded people. It is basically a discussion forum where participants link to a site. To participate in a newsgroup, individuals have to apply for membership. Once they register themselves they can post their messages and reply to the remarks of others. There are newsgroups specifically designed for creative writers or those aspiring to write. Such individuals can join the community of writers and exchange ideas, and get feedback on their writings. There are newsgroups exclusively for only published writers, unpublished writers, science fiction writers, writers of romantic writings, poets, short story writers, and even writers of non-fiction work. Learners freely seek feedback or critique, and veterans share their experiences. There are newsgroups that give access to a large audience to meet all kinds of interests for creative writing.

### 3.3.4 Bulletin Boards

Many websites provide bulletin boards, which is a facility for discussion. This is asynchronous communication and messages posted on it would have permanent visibility. Those who have access to a particular bulletin board can log on to it at any time and read the messages. The advantage of this tool in creative writing is that potential creative writers can come together to explore a genre and work online to create a piece of writing. Often but not always, bulletin boards are confined to a group and require online registration. There are sites like 'createwrt.net' that provide bulletin board services even to housebound disabled budding writers.

### 3.3.5 Instant Messaging

Instant messaging, as its name implies, is an online mode of synchronous communication where the message is displayed instantaneously on the other person's screen. Instant messaging systems have a friend list and instantly inform if someone from the list comes online. Obviously, here both the persons have to be online at the same time. This tool is also used for improving creative writing skills. For instance, 'Twitter' according to Carvin is one such instant messaging tool (www.twitter.com/manyvoices) that is used for collaborative writing[7]. He further mentions that Mayo uses a framework called 'Twittory' and has invited middle school children to participate in it. Each child should add only 140 characters to it and within 140 posts the story should be completed.

### 3.3.6 Chat or Conferencing

Chat/conferencing is a synchronous method of communication in real time. Chat normally facilitates communication sessions among the individuals or groups in private or public domain. Private here means that the software enables individual chat rooms for different users. The software may also facilitate the use of a white board that can be used as a blackboard in a real class room. Many online learning platforms have a chat function. The learners are informed about the timings of the chat sessions through e-mail or phone. The teacher and the learners log on at the same time and the learning process takes place in real time. These sessions are normally used for quick problem solving by the learners. It is also used by the teachers when they want to address a specific topic or get a team work done. Such chat sessions help in socialising and building relationships, which

are extremely important for developing creative writing skills. Learners can hone their writing skills by writing on the white board and getting an instant feedback. There are creative writing chat rooms, especially for adolescents. Creative writing chat rooms give them an opportunity to meet other young people who share their interest. There are online chat rooms like 'fearofwriting.com' and 'bcreative.proboards100.com' where people unite to write. The idea of a story is floated and everyone gets a chance to build it up.

### 3.3.7 Internet Telephony

Internet telephony is the facility to make phone calls to people via the Internet. Long distance calls become cheaper through this facility. The infrastructure, required other than the computer and Internet facility, is a microphone, fast modem, and high RAM memory. This is a synchronous communication method and allows chat sessions converted into voice communication. This brings back to the teaching-learning process where critical human factor is essential. Such multiple communication channels are often used for intense discussions.

### 3.3.8 Weblogs

Blogs or Weblogs are important Internet developments in the recent years. Owing to the volatile nature of the blogs, it is difficult to agree to a common definition for the blogs. Blogs can be personal websites, institutional websites, or professional websites. Chronological arrangement of information on the blogs and the interactive nature of some blogs make them a very effective e-learning tool for creative writing. While tracing the history of blogs, Clyde[8] points out that what attracted people to blogs was its "instant communication power by letting you post your thoughts to the web whenever the urge strikes." Lots of people write online diaries in the form of blogs. So people essentially use it for creative writing. Also exploiting its interactive nature, weblogs are used by teachers to communicate with their students for creative writing sessions. This is a text-based asynchronous communication method, where students can post their writings and ideas when they feel they are most creative, and also read the writings of others when it is convenient to them. The blog can become a communication hub for learners of creative writing.

A variety of synchronous and asynchronous tools as discussed above are used by various websites to impart creative writing. Videoconferencing through standard desktop computers is yet another synchronous communication tool used in e-learning in recent years. Though not widespread, videoconferencing does have a potential for use in creative writing. These tools enhance the teaching–learning process of creative writing rather than merely replicate what is done in the traditional environment.

## 4. USEFUL WEBSITES FOR E-LEARNING IN CREATIVE WRITING

The Web abounds in a variety of websites for e-learning in creative writing. Some sites like the 'Internet Writing Workshop' are a collection of mailing lists for the community of writers. Some cater to only chat sessions in creative writing. Some are mere bulletin boards. There are sites of different universities offering formal courses like a Bachelor of Arts (BA) degree in creative writing. For instance, University of Northampton in UK offers BA degree in creative writing through e-learning. There are commercial sites too and some individuals also offer training in creative writing skills free of cost. The following 10 websites for e-learning in creative writing will give a brief look into this exciting area. Many of these sites link to hundreds of other similar sites.

### 4.1 Can You Haiku?

Haiku (http://edsitement.neh.gov/view_lesson_plan.asp?ID =250) is a Japanese epigrammatic verse form of three short lines. This is very beautiful and sophisticated form of verse that helps in expressing a momentary and minute observation. This site with three simple lessons helps in learning the rules and conventions of haiku, appreciate haiku created by Japanese masters, and compose haiku. Plenty of online material can be downloaded through this site. The site teaches haiku in English.

### 4.2 Creative Writing

This is the creative writing site (http://coursecatalog. thecambridgeacademy.org/index.asp?PageAction =VIEWPROD&ProdID=323) of the Cambridge Academy. One hundred and eight online lessons on different literary genres are provided to help learners to improve their creative writing skills. This one-year online course is fee-based and students can enroll at anytime of the year.

### 4.3 Creativity Workshop

This site (http://www.creativityworkshop.com) helps people from all walks of life to develop their imagination and keep their creative instincts alive. It offers exercises through workshops in *creative writing, drawing, memoir, storytelling, and map making.* It helps learners overcome the fear of writing and creative blocks. The workshops also help in changing the perception of the participants and improving their self-confidence.

### 4.4 eWriteLife Magazine

This site (http://ewritelife.com/content/view/17/100 02/) offers some writing prompts and helps in creating and capturing ideas. Actually this site is a combination of a website and a blog, and archives the previous posts in the format of a magazine, which is easily accessible. The blog section continues but is not updated frequently. To receive the magazine one needs to register as a member.

### 4.5 Kids on the Net

This site (http://www.kidsonthenet.org.uk/about/ index.htm) invites children to post their writings on the net. Children from all over the world send their poems, short stories, opinions, and anything they write to this site. Anyone who logs on to this site can read the writings of the children. The site also provides writing tips and offers a number of online writing projects.

### 4.6 oneword.com

This website (www.oneword.com) helps in spontaneous flow of thoughts. A simple word is used as a prompt to write anything on it for one minute without stopping to think. This is a simple exercise in creative writing. The basic purpose of this site is to reduce the tendency which everyone has to edit oneself even before expressing oneself fully and freely. It is popular site where potential writers test their flow.

### 4.7 Online Writing Lab

Online Writing Lab (http://owl.english.purdue.edu/ internet/resources/genre.html) is an excellent gateway to business and technical, creative, and non-academic writing, writing in grade school through high school, writing in special fields, tutorials and guides, and writing abstracts and proposals. There are number of links under each category of writing and many of these links in turn link to thousands of writing resources.

### 4.8 STT Writing Courses

This site (http://www.sttcourses.co.uk/WritingCourses/ Courses/NovelAndShortStoryWriting/tabid/154/ Default.aspx) offers certificate course in novel and short story writing. Anyone who wants to learn short story or novel writing can take this course. Even those who already have some published work can also take this course to sharpen their writing skills. This course is fee-based, but offers some free information pack. The course offers help in every aspect of fiction writing from ideas and imagination to style and grammar. It also helps in getting published.

### 4.9 Virtual Writer

This site (http://www.virtualwriter.net/) is developed in association with Longford County Council, and helps in developing learner's literary talent. It helps in developing the skills in poetry, fiction, and creative non-fiction. Learners can also join the writers group through this site. It also gives access to a number of projects related to developing creative writing skills. People can also read the works of the local writers here. This site also links to various creative writing courses in Ireland and Britain in particular. For example it links to a course on *Creative Writing for Beginners* of Galway-Mayo Institute of Technology. This link provides all the needed information about this course, i.e., its aim, the course content, the fee, the duration, the starting date, the resource person, etc.

### 4.10 WritePro

This site (http://www.writepro.com) offers a creative writing tutorial program called WritePro. This tutorial helps in the craft of fiction writing and making even non-fiction highly exciting and interesting to the readers. It offers software which is easy to install and helps in creating characters, plots, and dialogue. It also offers tips to different kind of writers.

### 5. CONCLUSION

A society that reads and writes well can go a long way in developing a nation. The technology is making a significant impact on learning of creative writing skills. Many individuals often nurture the desire to be great writers. Expression, articulation, and communication are paths to success in any field. E-learning in creative writing appears to be an effective way of improving ones writing skills. Modern libraries are the centres that give computing and Internet facilities to their user community. Librarians can draw the attention of their users to the creative writing sites and encourage them to use them.

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