

I'm a writer and ...

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RECONCILING IDENTITIES: WORKING IN THE SPACE BETWEEN WRITING AND TEACHING

Like it or not, most of us cannot make a living from writing alone. In my own career, there was a time when I could. I (TD) could write two to four books a year and make a living wage.

That balance has shifted. With the emergence of the world wide web, by the late 1990s I could see that those illustrated non-fiction books I loved writing so much – everything from *The Teach Yourself Guide to Sex* (yes, really) to *Savage Earth* – would probably be replaced, in part at least, by information online. That material might not be as rigorously researched or elegantly formulated and crafted, but it would be free to the end user, or nearly so, and could be retrieved at a distance. I could see the writing not so much as on the wall as in the ether.

In response, and to help secure future employment, in the early 2000s I returned to academia part-time and registered for a doctorate in education. Even before I submitted my thesis, the department realised they had a professional writer in their midst and had me running writing workshops for doctoral students. Soon after, I became a Royal Literary Fund (RLF) Writing Fellow giving one-to-one tutorials alongside facilitating writing workshops as an independent trainer while continuing as a professional writer. Building on these experiences and the skill set I'd developed over more than 30 years – as a field scientist, then non-fiction writer, qualified teacher and educational researcher – prepared me to set up a programme to train professional writers to run writing workshops in universities. The transformation from writer to writer-educator I'd undergone myself is one I wanted to foster in others. The RLF Consultant Fellows' programme, that I co-devised and then led, trained a diverse community of writers drawn from RLF Writing

Fellows to work with universities. That community of writers and the way they resolve their dual roles as writers and educators is the focus of this article.

Writers facilitating learning

The Royal Literary Fund's Fellowship programme places established writers in UK universities where they serve as one-to-one writing tutors to complement in-house writing support. Since 1999, around five hundred authors have worked as RLF Writing Fellows offering one-to-one tutorials in over 150 higher education institutions.

However, such tutorials can only reach a comparatively small proportion of students. To have wider impact, with both university students and staff, the RLF set up the Consultant Fellowship programme in 2013. Selected RLF Writing Fellows joined a nine-month programme in which they trained as independent consultants to run writing workshops in universities (Day and Swinburne, 2017). Since that initial training, fifty writers have qualified as Consultant Fellows (CFs) of whom 30 remain on the CF register and between them work with some 60 UK universities and research centres. They are a highly eclectic group, ranging from poets, novelists and dramatists, to biographers and science writers. Their backgrounds are as diverse as the range of interventions they offer.

Some CFs work with undergraduates, offering highly interactive workshops – formerly face-to-face, now online. Undergraduate workshop themes range from essay-writing to critical thinking. Others work with postgraduates, offering interventions of between two hours and several days, focusing variously on writing

dissertations, theses or academic papers, or encouraging them to engage with the wider public through blogs, books or magazine and newspaper articles. A number of CFs work with staff, inspiring them to write more impactful research papers, more successful grant proposals, or devising better strategies for drawing out the writing potential of their students. Immersives are a particular CF offer, rather like on-campus writing retreats, but with workshops on certain days and students completing tasks and attending one-to-one tutorials on other days. All such learning interventions are finetuned for the target participants and evaluation scores and written feedback are gathered from participants afterwards.

One thing characterises all CFs. First and foremost, they are writers. Secondly, they are learning facilitators. Although each has their specialisms as a writer, when they work as a CF in universities they are focusing on functional writing: the writing assignments and tasks students and staff normally undertake in their working week.

Many CFs dislike calling themselves ‘teachers’ preferring the term learning facilitator or writing developer. We are ‘drawing out’ rather than ‘putting in’, co-constructing knowledge with university students and staff; this reflects the ethos behind the CF training. CFs keep presenting to a minimum and actively encourage discussion and questioning. They build in plenty of opportunities for groupwork, personal reflection and writing. In CF learning interventions, typically 55–65% of the time is activity-based.

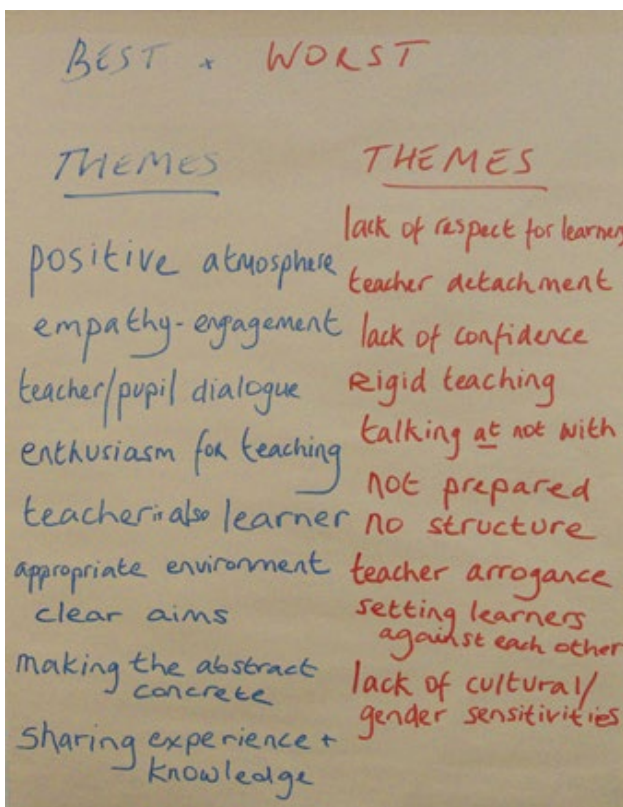


Image 1. In the Consultant Fellows’ training, trainees are encouraged to consider what encourages learning, and discourages it, based on their own experience



Image 2. Consultant Fellows’ workshops can be holistic, whole-body experiences

Investigating a unique community

In working with universities, the usual focus of CFs is on functional writing. However, rigorous and holistic research on the medium- to long-term effect of writing development interventions in universities is comparatively scarce (Kornhaber et al, 2016; Tremblay-Wragg et al, 2021). Given this sparsity, research on the effectiveness of CF learning interventions may have a valuable contribution to make. How and to what extent do the writing behaviour and conceptions of university students and staff change after attending one or more writing development interventions? This seems an important question given that writing lies at the heart of much academic endeavour, as both process and product. For the university, another consideration must be the cost-effectiveness of any writing development intervention – especially, where outside agencies are involved.

The RLF is keen to explore the medium- to long-term impact of learning interventions led by CFs. As a starting point, we wanted to find out more about the CF community itself. How do these writers reconcile their writing and educational identities? What are their motivations and influences? What do CFs think they are bringing to the learning experience of university students and staff that is different to what other educators provide? To undertake this research, we wanted to collaborate with an ‘insider’: someone with research interests and expertise complementary to my own as a CF, and who could represent the university context. In this, we found Dr Ursula Canton, a learning developer at Glasgow Caledonian University (see box).

Ursula Canton, research collaborator

I would not call myself a writer, even though there hasn't been a time in my professional life when I was not writing. My first steps as a PhD student in Theatre Studies were as dependent on writing as my current role as a writing developer. My writings encompass small blog entries and teaching materials. My publications include peer-reviewed research articles and a monograph based on my doctoral thesis. Yet writing has never been the main point. It is a necessary step to communicate what I have discovered as a researcher or to share my expertise as a teacher. I might be writing, but, unlike CFs, I do not feel I am writer.

In my role as a writing developer I research and teach writing in HE. So why am I particularly interested in collaborative research into the role of CFs? Is it just curiosity and wanting to know what the 'competition' can offer?

I do not see CFs as direct competition. We might teach in similar contexts, but our backgrounds and viewpoints are very different. My teaching emphasises insights into writing gained through research and my experience in working with academic writers. CFs, on the other hand, while also hopefully drawing upon relevant research and teaching, bring their experience as a professional writer to the fore. Writing is at the core of their professional identity. These different perspectives shape our teaching, and in doing so our contributions can complement each other, they need not compete.

My field of research is writing and the teaching of writing, and as a good researcher, I cannot help wanting to find out more: What are we teaching? Why do we need to teach that? What are we missing? What works best in a particular context? Working with the RLF on evaluating the impact of their CF programme allows me to answer such questions in a wider context. This should yield fresh insights above and beyond those we glean from university staff.

To investigate how CFs self-identified, as well as their motivations and practices, in autumn 2019 22 CFs with at least 3 years' experience after qualifying completed an in-depth questionnaire. Working within BERA (British Educational Research Association) research guidelines, CFs were offered a book voucher for their voluntary participation and 22 of the 23 qualifying CFs accepted the offer and shared their perspective with us in great detail.

The survey questions began by exploring what their role as a Consultant Fellow enables them to do, the relationship between being a writer and being a CF, how one impacts on the other, and what personal factors limit the amount of CF work they undertake. Further questions explored their practice in running a specific workshop, what factors shape their workshop design, and how they would know whether they had been

successful in running it. The final questions drilled down into their experience of being a CF. To what extent did they consider the writing challenges that students and staff face were similar to those CFs experience, in their professional writing lives? What qualities do they bring as a Consultant Fellow that non-CFs (other outsiders or university staff) are unlikely to bring? In their work as a CF, what are the biggest frustrations they face? What gives them the greatest satisfaction?

Here we focus on three aspects of the CF responses: how CFs reconcile their dual roles; how one role feeds into the other (or doesn't); and the benefits of being part of a professional community whose members are both writers and educators.

Reconciling the two roles: writer and learning facilitator

Writers are an unusual breed. Creative writers especially, such as novelist and poets, are willing to spend years developing their craft, with comparatively little likelihood of gaining commercial success (Gouthro, 2015). They are willing to confound Maslow's hierarchy (Maslow, 1962), choosing to self-actualise in their chosen vocation as a writer rather than live a more comfortable life with relative security. Writers bring this dedication to the craft in their practice as educators, and with it, knowledge of the practical and emotional side of bringing text to fruition, sometimes against tight deadlines and for very specific requirements.

Consultant Fellows operate in the 'Third Space' with 'identities drawn from both professional and academic domains' (Whitchurch, 2009, p.407). The socially- and psychologically-constructed nature of identity (Jenkins, 2014) is slippery and changing, both for educationalists and writers, in response to the evolving work environment (Trede et al, 2012; Gouthro, 2015). For example, many writers have had to radically change the way they work, the artefacts they create, and the way they promote themselves, with the rise of the internet age. In the last year, educators in HE have moved to working largely or entirely online. The shifts in role prompt more or less subtle changes in identity.

Against this background of change, Consultant Fellows, like most other writers, appreciate that they cannot devote themselves entirely to writing. For one novelist: 'Second to my writing, [being a CF] has become my primary focus.' For many CFs, doing educational work provides the income that supports the writing they most love to do. For one journalist and novelist:

In short, being a CF enables me to be a writer [...] Being a CF allows me to continue to identify as a writer, and now also as a writer-trainer which are complementary rather than at odds with each other.

For a novelist, creative non-fiction writer and journalist: Being a Consultant Fellow allows me to plan my time in a predictable way. [...] This clarity, and the consequent ability to lock down income for a given year, is invaluable to a freelance writer.

And for one novelist:

For me, part-time, freelance work that pays well allows me to maximize my time for writing. CF work has offered me the best rate of pay that I've ever had, and so frees up more time for my own work.

A few CFs strongly compartmentalize their CF work, such as this dramatist:

Immersive interventions [...] work better for me in terms of my own writing practice: you prepare, deliver, and report on a retreat, for example, and that will take perhaps three weeks of intense and exclusive focus; but that time can be ring-fenced so that it leaves you free before and after. I'd rather this than the steady weekly engagement that somehow always runs into what should be a teaching-free day.

Another CF – a journalist and creative non-fiction writer – adopts a similar approach. She prefers to work intensively with doctoral students on multi-day retreats or immersives (or their online equivalent) so that she is either working more or less 'full-on' as a writer/editor or 'full-on' in her writing development role. As she explains: ... for me, teaching/coaching uses the same part of my brain as I need for my own writing. So, I find the CF work can sometimes leave me more drained and with less time for my own writing than I'd wish.

Strongly compartmentalising the two roles – writer and learning facilitator – is one solution to resolving tension. However, for most CFs the two roles are much more integrated across the year, and they find themselves managing their writing and their educational work week on week. The success of CF work can create its own problems. For one creative non-fiction writer: 'I put my writing first. Last year, my CF work took up too much time so this year I am cutting back, since I want to get a new book started.' And for a poet and academic writer, balancing CF work with writing:

I do feel my own [writing] should always be my top priority, and [...] this was quite difficult to sustain. Equally, at times my own work becomes extremely demanding, as for instance when completing a new book. This too can create tension between the two activities, especially because I value them both.

Despite these difficulties, for many CFs, being an educator does not just pay the bills and create time and space for writing. There are great pay offs in terms of satisfaction and fulfilling a sense of mission.

Entering the domain of HE brings its own rewards, working with students and staff, as this poet reports:

Also, meeting a wide range of people in HE, coming away with a sense of what's going on, what they do, and of how interesting it all is.

For this journalist and novelist:

I love running the sessions! I really enjoy and find great satisfaction in enabling people to find new

ways to approach their writing and to find new ways of solving problems with their writing! I love giving an injection of creativity into academic writing, which can get bogged down in dry language and facts.

And for this novelist and children's fiction writer:

As a writer I'm on a lifelong quest to improve my writing not to just find a quick fix. I love seeing the joy students experience when you allow them to think freely, to explore and play with ideas before writing anything.

The interplay between writing and facilitating learning

Most CFs have found synergistic ways of navigating a course between their writerly and educational identities. For example, many have discovered powerful parallels in the processes of writing in the two settings. For one CF, who is a journalist, short story writer and novelist:

The relationship between my work as a CF and my creative writing is mutually beneficial. Being a published writer means I am accustomed to developing my own work to a publishable standard – to editing and being edited. I'm also used to the emotional journey of preparing writing for a readership. I'm used to working with narrative, and to the kind of problem-solving necessary to finish both long-form and short-form fiction. I've had to give careful consideration to issues like voice, narrative tension, clarity and flow. I pay careful attention to the things that can keep a reader paying attention – to the length of sentence and to their rhythm, for example. This kind of attention to detail is important for all kinds of writing, including academic writing.

For a journalist and copywriter:

Believe me there are many overlaps [between writing and CF work], particularly for someone like me whose career has been predominantly writing for a specific audience. Academics these days are expected to be accomplished writers / journalists / editors (often unfairly, in my view).

For many respondents to the research survey, their CF work informs and invigorates their writing. For that journalist and copywriter:

I've found teaching academic writing has improved my own writing, especially clarity of thinking and expression, and editing.

While for a novelist and copywriter:

[Being a CF] encourages me to read more widely than I would otherwise have done – and some of my learning on clarity and precision has been applicable to my own writing.

Being part of the CF community, and working with other CFs on co-delivering courses, brings other rewards. For a creative non-fiction writer:

Working closely with a [CF] colleague [...] and immersing myself in the writing of gifted students generates energy and new ideas that often feed

into my own work.

She adds:

Most of my CF work is in immersives. Each one takes a week or so of close collaboration with a colleague to prepare, and much of the following week to deliver. [...] Being a CF is a brilliant antidote to the isolation of writing.

The strengths of being part of a practice-based community

Reconciling the two identities is strengthened by being part of a community of practice. From inception the 9-month CF training was designed around the notion of developing a professional community of practice (Wenger, 1998). Trainees went through shared 'rites of passage' when they designed and implemented workshop activities, and each trainee observed and was observed by all the others, with constructive 360-degree feedback an integral part of the process. They all participated in each other's workshops, and they all observed one another working with students. Through these shared experiences, emerging CFs bonded as a community.

Once qualified, they joined the wider CF community in which all members hold equivalent standing. All are encouraged to participate through running meetings, contributing to online forums, and composing blog items for students and staff, published on the CF website. Prior to March 2020, CFs met twice a year in their region, and once every 2-3 years nationally. At the national events many CFs ran workshop sessions to share and explore good practice – everything from using walks and observing nature to shift mental state and encourage creativity, contemplation and reflection, to specific techniques for comparing star-rated research papers to highlight their effectiveness in revealing originality, significance and rigour – Research Excellence Framework (REF) assessment criteria (REF, 2021).

Many CFs were well aware of the value in being part of this peer community. For this creative non-fiction writer:

I was co-leading an immersive recently when I decided to take part in one of the exercises my colleague was leading. Students were working on live text from their own theses, and as my manuscript was on my laptop, I decided to use that. The power of this process astounded me, and I came away so inspired that I continued work on my own manuscript all the way home on the train.

She finishes:

[...] becoming a CF has had an enormous impact on my personal and professional life. I used to feel isolated as a writer and I no longer do. I find the work fascinating and hugely rewarding. The income I earn from it is vital, and the energy it generates is an inspiration.

In March 2020, as campuses shut down, being a member of the CF community became invaluable. Very quickly CFs were meeting online to solve the problems around

transforming face-to-face workshops to an online equivalent. Most CFs have risen to the online challenge and are working closely with their university clients to support students at this particularly difficult time.

Many CFs have gravitated to similar solutions, using video conferencing, especially Zoom, for highly interactive sessions of 90- or 120-minutes with up to 18 participants. Polling and break out rooms for groupwork became common ingredients. Flipping, getting participants to do pre-session activities which are then followed up on within the sessions, has been favoured by some. Flipping reverses the common practice of introducing new material 'in class' and then doing assignments based on that material either in class or for homework. Instead, participants can be asked to read specified background materials beforehand, watch an introductory video pre-recorded by the facilitator, or undertake preliminary tasks such as reflecting on their current writing challenges. Flipping means that the online sessions can be more focused on group activities and discussion, rather than on solo work or information-giving.

Even several-day activities, such as immersives and writing retreats, can be broken down into online whole-group sessions, interspersed by participants writing on their own or working online in small groups, complemented by workshop leaders seeing participants for one-to-one online tutorials. Such strategies have helped compensate for the lack of conventional face-to-face contact. Indeed, most CFs are busier than ever, working closely with university staff to problem-solve how to address the multiple challenges of students at this time – including gently nurturing their emotional resilience through setting up supportive online writing groups.

Twice-yearly regional CF meetings became superseded by more regular online meetings catering for the whole community, and organised by a different CF each time. Initially, these meetings responded to the practicalities of running workshops. The meetings themselves developed into a test bed for trying out different functionalities of the webinar software. Gradually the meetings evolved into two distinct kinds, reflecting the dual nature of being a writer and being a CF. Themed sessions centre on aspects of the CF role, such as giving and receiving feedback online and how best to help students foster self-supporting online writing groups. The other strand, the 'creativity booster' sessions, are geared towards the 'writerly' side, and maintaining literary productivity during lockdown. Inevitably, there are overlaps between the two strands. Creativity can benefit CF work, and tackling prosaic problems with CF work can feed into maintaining productivity as a writer.

The special qualities that CFs bring

Identity operates at many levels. As writers we are familiar with the emotional challenges of struggling to put words on paper, and as CFs we can identify with

workshop participants experiencing that struggle. We can provide reassurance and offer possible strategies borne of experience. But identity also finds expression in the words we write. As Hyland (2016, p. 44) proposes, in the context of writing, 'identity is a performance'. When we write, Hyland continues, we are:

[...] constructing ourselves as credible members of a particular social group, so that identity is something we do; not something we have. Almost everything we say or write, in fact, says something about us and the kind of relationship we want to establish with others.

Day (2018, pp. 25–26) takes up this theme:

When writing academically, we are not just writing within a discipline, we are writing for particular kinds of people within that discipline. [...]

[...] identity in writing is an interplay between what we are bringing to a writing task, in terms of what we disclose consciously and unconsciously about ourselves through our writing, and how we are seeking to engage with, and satisfy, the community of readers for whom we are writing. Arguably, there is always a tension between expressing yourself as you might wish to, and conforming to certain conventions of the disciplinary community for whom you are writing.

CFs are particularly well placed to navigate this territory and encourage students and staff to develop their 'voice' within the boundaries of what is acceptable within academic discourse in their discipline. As a creative non-fiction writer explains:

I think it immensely important that we are professional writers, and I believe this is our greatest strength as CFs. As outsiders, we have greater freedom than other writing trainers, and academic staff. We know about the system but we are not part of it, and I think this makes our interventions refreshing, and even exciting for participants. As professional authors we depend on writing for our survival, and this is a particular strength because it means we know what works in the real world, outside university.

And for one poet, who is both a CF and a university staff member:

I can offer a creative solution to problem solving. I can use the elements of storytelling and writing poetry to create texts and I have in depth knowledge of writing for different audiences. All these elements may not be available to other purely academic staff or those with a professional background.

Focusing on voice, narrative and protagonist – concerns of most professional writers – is something that an academic might not consciously bring to bear. But a CF can explore this with workshop participants, in a writing group setting or in one-to-one tutorials. Doing so can help bolster an undergraduate essay or doctoral thesis. It can make all the difference between success and failure when writing a grant proposal or an academic

journal article. For example, when working with doctoral students and early career researchers I (TD) sometimes focus on choice of protagonist. Voice and viewpoint can be shaped more or less consciously. I use the real-life example of a colleague who works with stakeholders in malaria control and prevention. When writing about the success of a project, choosing the protagonist – the person, group, idea or object that is most changed over the course of the story – can transform the writing. By switching protagonist – the research team, the village community affected by malaria, the malaria parasite itself, or the mosquito that transmits it – the story can be told in the most powerful way for a particular purpose and readership.



Image 3. The protagonist

And finally, CFs can offer inspiration for those students and staff who might never have thought of themselves as writers. Many students may not have had the opportunity to work closely with a writer. For Billet et al (2010), having contact with someone in your zone of proximal development (Vygotsky, 1962) can be a powerful influence on choice of career. A writer who has trod the path before you can inspire you to choose a career that involves writing as the primary means of expression. For many other students – especially those who are not studying English Literature or English Language – the involvement of a professional writer brings focus to writing as something worthy of exploration, both for inspiration and for making explicit the hidden rules and assumptions underlying expression in a specific discipline.

In 2013, when the Royal Literary Fund set out to train RLF Writing Fellows to become learning facilitators, running writing workshops in universities, it was by no means certain that writers would find a way of accommodating the two roles – writer and educator – while working as independent consultants. That thirty remain in the CF community, and between them are working with more than 60 HEIs with many gaining substantial income from CF work, testifies to the success of the scheme. Those who have left the CF community have done so for good reasons: either to focus more or less full-time on writing, because they have gained employment in universities as creative writing lecturers, or because of retirement or ill health.

The resilience of the CF community has truly been tested since it was set up. The HE landscape has shifted.

Research and teaching staff in universities have become more aware of the need to be highly engaged and responsive as educators, with many more having gained at least Fellowship of the Higher Education Academy (FHEA) status (Botham, 2018; AdvanceHE, 2021). Those who commission external providers have become more discriminating. With that, more teaching provision has shifted in-house. Being a dilettante educator, dipping in and out to offer the occasional inspirational workshop, might have worked several years ago, but not any more. At the same time, course curricula have become more integrated, blending face-to-face and online learning. This was happening well before the Covid-19 pandemic, and with the move to online learning since, the shift has deepened.

The CF community is well placed to respond. CFs are able to navigate between their roles as writers and educators, and to do so in multiple ways that reflect their preferred practices as writers, whether in a highly compartmentalised manner or in a more integrated way, combining the two roles week on week. With a strong and healthy core in the CF community, meeting regularly online, CFs continue to learn from and support one another but now with greater urgency.

If CFs are to continue to be successful – both in terms of their own income and in benefiting students and university staff – uppermost in their minds must be understanding the problems of their clients, and collaborating closely with those clients to help solve them. The value of CFs needs to be even more strongly evidence based. With that in mind, the next step is an holistic study of the effectiveness of the more intensive CF interventions, from the perspective of postgraduate participants.

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Dr Trevor Day, originally a marine scientist and science writer, is now a social scientist, writing developer and an academic author and nature writer. In his spare time he is inclined to dive into a river or the sea given the slightest opportunity. His latest books are *Success in Academic Writing* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2nd ed) and *Sardine* (Reaktion Books), a multidisciplinary appraisal of this modest but important fish. He thrives on helping others unleash the power and precision of their writing, especially doctoral students and early-to mid-career researchers. Trevor is Director of the Royal Literary Fund's Consultant Fellows' programme.



Dr Ursula Canton's career built upon but also moved away from her original disciplines in literature and linguistics (in various European languages) and then her PhD about British theatre. Circumstances and life choices led her back to language (just English this time), and she now teaches and researches academic writing at two Scottish HEIs. While the theatre connection gives her kudos when working at the Royal Conservatoire of Scotland, it is not something she mentions regularly when working with construction students or engineers at Glasgow Caledonian University.