

# Creative Careering - Innovative Approaches to Post-Graduation Planning

Samantha Smith



In this case study I provide a 'creative tool-kit' of simple ways in which staff can help prepare English and Creative Writing students for their careers after graduation. In particular, I highlight the benefits for such students of viewing themselves as part of the 'creative industries'. The case study includes anonymised quotations from students across all three years of undergraduate study as well as web links to relevant resources and organisations.

## Background / Context

Through my company Transition Tradition I work with individuals, businesses and organisations across the creative industries. I am often asked to design and deliver sessions in the area traditionally referred to as 'employability.' Whether delivering sessions to visual arts students or students of English and Creative Writing I try to adopt innovative approaches that will speak to an overtly (or latently) creative audience. However, within English and Creative Writing cohorts I frequently observe a complete disassociation from the Creative Industries. It is my belief that there is a huge amount to be gained by enabling these students to 'self-identify' with creativity and the sectors the DCMS (Department for Culture, Media and Sport) terms the, 'Creative Industries.'

In this case study I will highlight ways in which we can prepare students of English and Creative Writing for the particular challenges of the transition period after graduation. As well as considering the industries within which they may choose to locate themselves, I will also address the different working structures they may need to adopt.

## The Challenges

The five biggest challenges when working with students of English and Creative Writing are:

- A resistance to traditional 'careers / employability' training
- Poor awareness of alternative ways of structuring a working life
- Disassociation from the creative industries

The Higher Education Academy, Innovation Way, York Science Park, Heslington, York, YO10 5BR, United Kingdom  
T +44 (0)1904 717500 · F +44 (0)1904 717505 · [enquiries@heacademy.ac.uk](mailto:enquiries@heacademy.ac.uk) · [www.heacademy.ac.uk](http://www.heacademy.ac.uk) · [Twitter@HEAcademy](https://twitter.com/HEAcademy)

The Higher Education Academy is a company limited by guarantee registered in England and Wales no. 04931031.  
Registered as a charity in England and Wales no. 1101607. Registered as a charity in Scotland no. SC043946.  
The Higher Education Academy and its logo are registered trademarks and should not be used without our permission.

- Failure to apply 'academic' skills to Development Planning
- Lack of ownership of the value of the 'creative' in Creative Writing

I'd like to start with the last point first. I am constantly surprised by the wariness with which English and Creative Writing students approach the word 'creative'.

Within the visual arts there is a relatively easy self-identification as a 'creative' person and towards the end of degree programmes, a creative practitioner. However, within English subjects few students are comfortable describing themselves with this way. They will (at a push) talk about becoming writers or poets but the word 'creative' is firmly associated with visual arts or pretension!

## Why is 'Creativity' Important?

Until students self-associate with 'creativity' they cannot recognize its potential importance to them or its value to others. Recognizing elements of creativity in different roles can be the first step to finding fulfilling employment; equally, being able to talk about the commercial value of your creativity can be key to securing a job when emerging from a multi-vocational degree. There is also a wealth of information, advice and guidance targeted specifically at emerging 'creative' graduates. However, undergraduates I speak to across English subjects frequently disregarded these services as 'only for artists'.

I didn't realise there was so much money put into organisations to help students and graduates looking for alternatives to a 'corporate' career. Since I started to research the help that is available I've realised that starting my own business is an option as well as working in someone else's! Third Year Undergraduate, University College of Falmouth.

Once a student begins to self identify as 'creative' the next challenge is to overcome their anxiety about the term 'industry.'

I just want to be a freelance writer, I don't think that makes me part of any industry and I can't imagine why I would need to know about business to do that. First Year Undergraduate, Exeter University.

The DCMS places writing and its market-facing activity – publishing – firmly within the creative industries. Along with many other roles within the creative industries, writers tend to adopt 'alternative' working structures, such as portfolio working, self-employment and freelancing. If we can get students of English and Creative Writing to identify with the creative industries they immediately gain access to resource providers and funding bodies geared up to the challenges of supporting knowledge economy workers. Once a student

understands they are a 'creative' person within 'industry', huge amounts of information, support and sometimes, even money, become accessible.

Organisations such as Literature Training and [Spread the Word](#) are fantastic sector-specific providers but students often lack familiarity with accessing support, professional development opportunities and funding across the creative industries. Helping students to develop an understanding of the scope of the creative industries and the inter-relationship between the sectors is invaluable. With little more than a short half an hour introduction the majority of undergraduates I meet have grasped the basic operational structures and understood that there are a plethora of bodies within each sector to support and develop creativity and business.

I knew there were some big funding bodies like the Arts Council but I had never understood that every sector has some sort of collective body which can provide training opportunities, sometimes funding or a network to join. Third Year Undergraduate, University of Worcester.

## Relating Work and Creative Practice

Of course not every student of Creative Writing will choose an overtly 'creative' career. English and Creative Writing courses attract diverse cohorts. However, 'Work and Creative Practice' tend to be related in three main ways. (In this students of English and Creative Writing have a great deal in common with Visual Arts graduates. Antonia Walker at Arts Work is at present researching the parallels and points of departure between these student groups).

- Group 1 will seek careers that enable the continuation of personal practice whilst they use a permutation of that skill in a commercial setting.
- Group 2 are happy to break the connection completely in the short term to pursue their personal practice whilst covering their living expenses in an entirely unrelated role but hope to find a way to make the two areas converge in the future.
- Finally, Group 3 students harbour no ambition to link their personal practice and employment – even in the long term. In this case aligning them with 'industries', which can enable them to replicate the levels of interest and engagement they enjoy with their study can be key to personal success and fulfilment.

As these routes are so diverse a talk on, 'New Media Opportunities for Self –Publication' (although fascinating) will never speak to a whole cohort. I work with departments to try to find more sophisticated and innovative ways to get their students to engage with professional development planning and encourage individuals to apply the same rigour to this as to their creative work.

It is difficult sometimes to overcome both individual and institutional cynicism after so many PDP (Professional Development Planning) failures but at its best this is the antidote to boring generic careers

lectures - a highly personal exploration of possibility, which is supported and led by practical information, advice and guidance.

Creative Writing courses tend to have large numbers of lecturers who are also published writers. This means there is potential to source a great deal of this expertise 'in house' once the structures are in place. Where lecturers are comfortable sharing their experiences this can result in a healthy flow of information about personal and professional practice.

What I believe is currently lacking across the subject is structured, practical, enterprise and employability training, to complement students' developing personal practice.

So what can we do to ease the transition after graduation for creative writing students?

## **Information, Advice and Guidance for the Transition from Creative Writing**

Firstly, support students to take ownership of creativity – as a personal quality, need and marketable value – within the context of professional development planning.

One of the most effective ways to do this is by presenting speakers who self-identify as 'creative' to speak about the ways in which they structure their professional and personal practice. Alumni and staff often prove excellent candidates but if your faculty struggles to find willing volunteers online resources such as the [Creative Choices](#) website (funded by the Creative and Cultural Sector Skills Council), offer 'real' world case studies. When bringing in visiting speakers it is important to think laterally – securing an acclaimed poet or author may be a terrific ruse for the faculty but can compound undergraduate anxiety. Providing a broad spectrum of case studies (within a lecture) or a series of visiting speakers with diverse experiences will better serve the student body. It is also important to give speakers a clear structure.

## **Visiting Speakers**

When I commission speakers for 'employability' programmes I request detail on specific areas:

- A 'typical' day
- How they generate revenue
- Key transition periods in that career
- Colleagues and co-workers
- Opportunities in different regions of the country etc.

Without a rubric there is a risk that the practical advice can be lost to witty anecdote!

## Introduce the Industry

Secondly, introduce creative industry agendas and the broad spectrum of funding, resources and agencies. The institution may have a creative industries specialist within the careers team or be able to source guidance from external agencies tasked with supporting the creative economy and enterprise in your region. Alternatively, students can be tasked with researching and writing case studies of a particular sector structure and network.

## Specialist Sessions

Also, you could consider providing skill-raising sessions for your budding 'creative workers' (on subjects such as networking, Intellectual Property and project management), which have value in both employment and professional practice. Regardless of intended destination, awareness of these areas adds value. The ability to utilise networks, identify sources of support and project manage are equally relevant skill-sets for a mature student, keen to re-structure her working life post-graduation or a new undergraduate interested in a career in publishing.

The networking session helped me to realise how many creative connections I could make. Another student's uncle is Editor of a regional paper – who knew! I want work experience in journalism but had no idea where to start, It seems I can start right here. First Year Undergraduate, University of Plymouth.

## Creative Conclusions

At the recent English Subject Centre event, Beyond the Placement: Creative Writing and Employability it was apparent that a large number of faculties were now embracing the need to prepare and support their students' postgraduate transition. Whilst implementation will vary enormously I believe any progression planning for students of English and Creative Writing must:

- Investigate the structure and relationship between the creative industries
- Raise awareness of the value of creativity
- Identify 'alternative' ways of structuring working life
- Clarify the function of relevant creative sector bodies and organisations
- Examine creative industry roles and identify the required specific and transferable skills

Faculties that provide this understanding will enable their graduates to reach their own, best, creative conclusions

## **Additional Author Information**

Samantha Smith founded Transition Tradition Limited. The company designs courses and training to support creative individuals and organisations in transition. In 2006, Samantha was chosen as one of 12 NESTA UK Creative Pioneers. Transition Tradition Limited subsequently secured capital investment.

Samantha graduated with a BA (1:1) and MA (Distinction) and holds an NVQ 4 in Information, Advice and Guidance. She is an affiliate member of AGCAS and works with staff and students at a number of institutions including: Exeter University, University of London, University of Worcester and the University College of Falmouth.