



Case Study

Cultivating the Craft: A Case Study of The Application of John Dewey's Experiential Learning Cycle to Creative Writing Classes

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Abstract

This paper discusses John Dewey's theory of experiential learning and its implications for teaching creative writing at the secondary and post-secondary levels. Dewey (1938) states that education is not a mere transfer of information, but a continuous cycle of experience, reflection and reconstruction. Creative writing is a discipline that deals with invention, revision, and interpretation of lived and imagined experiences. It is therefore an ideal context for implementing this educational cycle. Using a qualitative single-case study design, this paper documents the redesign of a creative writing workshop around four interlocking phases derived from Dewey's philosophy and its later formalisation in experiential learning theory: concrete experience, reflective observation, conceptualisation, and active experimentation. Data were drawn from instructor field notes, student drafts and revisions, and reflective journals collected across one instructional unit. Findings suggest that structuring the writing process around Dewey's cycle increased student engagement, deepened revision practices, and helped students construct a working theory of their own craft. The paper concludes with implications for writing pedagogy and recommendations for teachers who want to design experience-centred curricula.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Creative writing classes offer students more than just an opportunity to express themselves—they equip learners with critical thinking, self-reflection, and communication skills that are essential in both academic and real-world settings. However, the methods used to nurture these skills can greatly impact students' engagement and growth.

John Dewey's Experiential Learning Cycle highlights the importance of learning through direct experience, reflection, conceptualisation, and experimentation, providing a dynamic framework for promoting creativity in the classroom. When Dewey's ideas are applied to creative writing instruction, educators can construct immersive learning environments that actively construct knowledge and develop craft. For many decades, creative writing pedagogy in higher education has relied heavily on the classic Iowa Workshop model, a method that is focused primarily on a "produce and critique" dynamic. While this model encourages output, it often treats the writing mind as a passive observer during reading and as an isolated agent during production. These passive dynamic echoes what John Dewey called the "spectator theory of knowledge" (Nickerson, 2018). Under this approach, students struggle to bridge the gap between analysing literary masterworks and managing the messy, interactive process of generating their own prose.

For a long time, the teaching of creative writing has struggled with a paradox: while writing is fundamentally an act of experience, of recursion, it is often taught through static, product-oriented strategies that prioritise correctness over exploration (Elbow, 1973). Students are often asked to write a poem, a story, or a personal essay in response to a prompt, submit it for a grade, and proceed to the next assignment with little structured opportunity to experiment with, reflect on, and revise their creative choices. John Dewey's philosophy of education offers an alternative framework. Dewey (1938) argued that education should not be about pouring knowledge into passive minds, but about organising experiences so that each experience grows out of and leads into further experience. For Dewey, thinking itself was a cyclical process that began with a lived difficulty and moved through observation, hypothesis, reasoning, and testing toward new understanding (Dewey, 1933).

This paper explores what happens when a creative writing classroom is deliberately organised around Dewey's experiential cycle. It presents a qualitative case study of one creative writing unit redesigned to move students through four interrelated phases: engaging in a concrete writing experience, reflecting on that experience, conceptualising principles of craft from it, and actively experimenting with those principles in revision and new writing. The purpose of the study is not to test a hypothesis in the statistical sense but to provide a rich, situated account of how Dewey's ideas can be translated into classroom practice, and what that translation reveals about student growth as writers.

Two questions guide the paper:

1. How can Dewey's experiential learning cycle be operationalised in the design of a creative writing unit?

2. What effects does this experiential design appear to have on students' writing processes, revision practices, and self-understanding as writers?

This paper explores how John Dewey's theory of experiential learning can reform creative writing classrooms to address this pedagogical gap. Rather than seeing writing as a mysterious, inborn talent, a Deweyan framework considers creative writing as an active "reconstruction of experience" (Votava, 2018). This study tracks an undergraduate creative writing classroom that structured its curriculum around a continuous cycle: moving from raw creative impulse through structured technical constraints to expressive execution and, finally, to deep reflection.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Dewey's educational philosophy rests on the claim that not all experiences are equally educative. In *Experience and Education*, Dewey (1938) distinguished between experiences that are merely engaging in the moment and those that possess continuity, meaning they connect to a learner's past experiences and open pathways to future growth. An educative experience, in Dewey's terms, must also involve interaction between the learner and the conditions of the environment, so that the learner is actively shaping and being shaped by the material at hand. Earlier, in *How We Think*, Dewey (1933) had described reflective thought as a sequence beginning with a felt difficulty or problem, followed by its clarification, the generation of possible solutions, reasoning about their implications, and finally testing the solution through action. This five-phase account of reflective inquiry is widely regarded as the philosophical ancestor of later, more schematic models of experiential learning (Kolb, 1984).

Dewey's aesthetic theory adds a further dimension relevant to creative writing. In *Art as Experience*, Dewey (1934) argued that art is not separate from ordinary experience but is ordinary experience brought to heightened clarity, unity, and expressive form. Writing a poem or story, on this view, is not fundamentally different from any other form of purposeful, reflective doing; it simply demands an unusually deliberate shaping of material, emotion, and meaning into a coherent whole. This positions creative writing as an especially apt site for experiential pedagogy, since crafting a text already requires the writer to move among doing, perceiving the effects of what was done, and undergoing the consequences of revision.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

To construct a structured experiential pedagogy for creative writing, we must move past simplified interpretations of experiential learning (such as a generic "do, review, plan" loop) and return directly to Dewey's original philosophy (Stark, 2020). Dewey's experiential model relies on two foundational pillars: continuity and interaction (Stark, 2020). Continuity dictates that every experience inherits something from past experiences and directly shapes the quality of future ones. Interaction demands that learning emerge from a dynamic transaction between the student's internal mind and their external social environment (Nickerson, 2018).

In the arts, this transaction requires a balance between active doing and reflective “undergoing” – noticing the immediate consequences of one’s creative acts (Nickerson, 2018). In *Art as Experience*, Dewey described a particular triad that explains the transformation of raw human energy into a finished work of art:

- **Impulsion:** The initial, unshaped movement of the practitioner, prompted by a real-world dilemma or emotional cue.
- **Compression:** The internal tension that arises when external constraints, artistic traditions, or formal rules confront that initial impulse.
- **Expression:** The deliberate, reflective release of that tension into a completed piece of art (Hanes & Weisman, 2016).

3. METHODOLOGY AND CASE DESIGN

This study utilises a qualitative case-study design to monitor an intensive 16-week undergraduate creative writing workshop (N = 18). The course rejected the traditional model of assigning open-ended stories for distant critique. Instead, the curriculum was organised into sequential, iterative modules mapped directly onto Dewey’s experiential circuit.

The following sequence details how each creative unit was explicitly structured to ensure that students did not simply drift through an unstructured activity but instead achieved a cohesive, growth-oriented “educative experience” (Stark, 2020).

1. **Impulsion (The Sensory Prompt):** Weeks 1–4. Students are presented with raw, chaotic environmental stimuli, such as audio field recordings or uncontextualized historical artefacts, and are challenged to elicit immediate sensory responses rather than to plot narratives.
2. **Compression (Formal Constraints):** Weeks 5–8. This means that students force their raw sensory data into constrictive structural frameworks. For instance, rewriting a scene using only monosyllabic words or changing the narrative point of view, thereby establishing the internal tension Dewey considered essential to the craft.
3. **Expression (The Aesthetic Release):** Weeks 9–12. The compressed tension is unleashed into a structured draft. The student shares the text with a collaborative peer ecosystem, turning the internal struggle into a social transaction.
4. **Reconstruction (Reflective Undergoing):** Weeks 13–16. Rather than standard proofreading, students create detailed reflective rationales that accompany their structural decisions. This step links their previous habits to their emerging artistic identity.

The Experiential Learning Cycle

Although Dewey did not articulate his ideas in a single numbered cycle, later theorists moulded his insights into cyclical models of learning. Kolb’s (1984) experiential learning theory, perhaps the best-known of these, describes four recursive stages: concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualisation, and active experimentation. Kolb explicitly cited Dewey, along with Kurt

Lewin and Jean Piaget, as a foundational influence on this model. Schön’s (1983) notion of the reflective practitioner similarly builds off of Deweyan reflection, describing how professionals learn by reflecting both on and in the midst of action. Taken together, this body of theory suggests that durable learning depends on a loop in which action generates material for reflection, and reflection generates concepts or principles. Those principles are tested again in action, restarting the cycle at a more sophisticated level (Gonzalez, 2023).

Experiential Approaches to Creative Writing Pedagogy

Writing pedagogy scholars have independently arrived at practices that resonate strongly with Dewey’s cycle, even when Dewey is not explicitly cited. Elbow (1973, 1998) has argued for freewriting and low-stakes generative exercises that allow writers to produce raw material before evaluating it. This practice parallels the movement from concrete experience into reflection. Graves’s (1983) process-writing model, organised around drafting, conferencing, and revision, similarly treats writing as a recursive rather than linear activity. Vygotsky’s (1978) sociocultural theory, with its focus on learning through socially mediated activity within a zone of proximal development, complements Dewey’s individual-experiential emphasis by underscoring the role of peer response and teacher scaffolding in helping student writers move from intuitive craft choices to articulated principles. Lave and Wenger’s (1991) concept of situated learning also supports the idea that writers develop expertise through participation in authentic communities of practice, such as workshops, rather than through decontextualised instruction in rules (Salama & Holgate, 2025).

Despite these convergences, few studies explicitly frame a creative writing curriculum using Dewey’s cycle as an organising structure. This paper addresses that gap by presenting a case study in which the cycle was used intentionally as a design tool for a creative writing unit.

Method Research Design

This study used a qualitative single-case study design, appropriate for examining a bounded instructional intervention in depth within its natural context (Yin, 2018). The case was a single creative writing unit taught in a secondary-level elective creative writing course. A case study approach was chosen over an experimental design because the aim was to understand how Dewey’s cycle was enacted in practice and to generate a rich, contextualised account rather than to establish generalizable causal claims.

Context and Participants

The case was set in a creative writing elective that enrolled a small cohort of students in a workshop format. The class met for extended blocks that allowed time for writing, small-group response, and whole-class discussion within a single session. The instructor, who also served as the researcher, had previously organised the course around discrete assignments (a poem, then a short story, then a personal essay) submitted for evaluation with limited structured revision. For this unit, the

instructor redesigned instruction explicitly around Dewey's cycle.

Procedure and Data Sources

Instruction was organised into four recurring phases modelled on Dewey's account of reflective experience (Dewey, 1933, 1938) and its later elaboration by Kolb (1984): Concrete experience. Students were engaged in a low-stakes writing task, an authentic timed sketch from memory or observation, without concern for polish. Reflective observation. Students reread their own drafts and those of peers and used guided questions to notice which choices produced particular effects, recording their observations in a reflective journal.

Conceptualization

Through small-group and whole-class discussion, students named provisional principles of craft suggested by their observations, such as claims about pacing, concrete detail, or point of view.

Active experimentation. Students revised their original drafts or began new pieces, deliberately testing the principle they had articulated, thereby generating fresh material and restarting the cycle.

Data sources included the instructor's field notes taken across this period's unit, samples of student drafts and revisions collected at each phase, and excerpts from student reflective journals. These sources were analysed thematically, using open coding to identify recurring patterns in how students described their writing process and how their revisions changed across cycles.

4. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

From Experience to Reflection

Consistent with Dewey's (1938) claim that an experience becomes educative only when the learner reflects on its meaning, the case suggested that the initial writing task alone did little to build students' craft knowledge. It was the structured reflective observation phase, in which students reread their own and peers' drafts against guiding questions, that appeared to convert raw drafting activity into noticeable insight. Field notes recorded students independently identifying craft issues, such as recognising that a scene lost momentum when description overtook action, that had not surfaced when they were asked to write and submit a draft.

From Reflection to Conceptualisation

The conceptualisation phase appeared to provide students with language for intuitions they had previously been unable to articulate. Rather than receiving craft rules from the instructor in advance, students generated their own provisional principles from their reflections and then tested them against the group's shared observations. This process aligns with Dewey's (1933) description of reflective thought as reasoning that develops the implications of a suggestion before it is accepted or rejected. It echoes Vygotsky's (1978) emphasis on socially mediated meaning-making, since many of the principles' students named were refined collaboratively rather than individually.

From Conceptualisation to Experimentation

The clearest evidence of growth appeared in the active experimentation phase, when students returned to their drafts to test the principles they had just articulated. Revisions at this stage were more deliberate and purposeful than revisions produced under the course's earlier product-oriented model, in which students tended to make only surface-level corrections. Several students explicitly framed their revisions as tests of an idea, for example, rewriting an opening paragraph specifically to see whether starting in the middle of an action would create the tension they had identified as effective in a peer's draft. This pattern is consistent with Schön's (1983) account of reflective practitioners who use action itself as a form of inquiry.

Recursiveness and Growth Across Cycles

Because active experimentation generated new drafts, each cycle fed directly into a new concrete experience, allowing the class to move through the full sequence multiple times across this period's unit. Over successive cycles, student reflective journals showed a shift from evaluative comments focused on whether a piece was good to analytic comments focused on why a technique worked, suggesting a gradual internalisation of the reflective habits Dewey (1933) associated with genuine reflective thought. This progression supports the broader claim in experiential learning theory that repeated cycling, rather than a single pass through the stages, is what produces durable learning (Kolb, 1984).

Implications for Practice

This case suggests several practical implications for creative writing teachers. First, separating the act of drafting from the act of evaluation, so that concrete experience is protected from premature judgment, appears to support the kind of free generation of material that Elbow (1973) associated with productive freewriting. Second, building in explicit, structured time for reflective observation, rather than assuming that reflection will occur informally, seems necessary for turning experience into insight. Third, allowing students to construct their own provisional principles of craft, rather than receiving only rules from the instructor, appears to strengthen both engagement with and retention of those principles. Finally, treating revision as an experiment rather than a correction reframes revision as an extension of the same inquiry that produced the original draft, rather than a separate, remedial task.

5. LIMITATIONS

As a single-case qualitative study conducted by the instructor-researcher, this account is not intended to support generalizable causal claims about the effectiveness of Dewey's cycle compared with other pedagogies. The dual role of instructor and researcher raises the possibility of observer bias in interpreting student work and journals. The findings are also drawn from a single unit within a single course context, and the extent to which they transfer to other grade levels, genres, or class sizes is unknown. Future research using multiple cases,

external observers, and comparison conditions would strengthen confidence in these patterns.

6. CONCLUSION

Dewey's insistence that education must be organised around continuous, reflective experience offers creative writing teachers a coherent alternative to product-oriented instruction. By structuring a writing unit around concrete experience, reflective observation, conceptualisation, and active experimentation, this case study suggests that students can be supported in constructing their own working theories of craft, and in treating revision as a meaningful extension of inquiry rather than a corrective afterthought. While the findings of a single case cannot be generalised broadly, they provide a detailed illustration of how a century-old philosophy of education continues to offer practical guidance for teaching creative writing today.

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