

THE WRITING CIRCLE:  
CREATIVE HOPE IN ANXIOUS TIMES

By Peggy Riley

ABSTRACT:

Can a writing group make a difference in anxious times? In Autumn 2018 I was a sessional lecturer concerned by the growing number of students who identified as anxious and required learning support plans to help them cope. I wanted to understand the source of this anxiety: did students need writing support to help them feel less anxious – or was it writing that was causing their anxiety? I created a voluntary, non-assessed writing group for first-year students, The Writing Circle, intending it to grow as they did. And it did until 2020 when the pandemic shut campuses and moved us all online. Anxiety ramped up for students – and for me. Could a writing group like ours survive the move? And how could I learn to make a digital space feel intimate as well as inclusive? Through years of writing together on campus and online, through lockdowns and what came after, I've used a range of creative prompts and approaches to get us writing about and through feelings, aiming to diffuse anxiety as well as to address and challenge it. Throughout, students have become empowered to find new sources of confidence, to share early work and to write collaboratively, to make and publish

work together. As the world is poised again for change, how can we stay nimble and responsive as practitioners, so that our writing groups continue to meet the needs of participants – and also to inspire us, to fulfil our creative hopes?

The Writing Circle began as an experiment in 2018. What could we do about increasing levels of student anxiety at our university? More specifically, what could I do? Anxiety might be the “handmaiden of creativity” for T. S. Eliot, but anxiety in our students didn’t seem to be creative or productive. It was keeping them from attending workshops; it was stopping student writers in their tracks. Anxiety is nothing new for humans as a species (Crocq, 2015), but as a new sessional lecturer teaching creative writing students, I was unprepared for its prevalence and concerned by the growing numbers of students who seemed to require special learning plans to cope with it. Every year, students seemed to be more anxious than the group that came before them. I wasn’t just imagining it. In 2018 the Office for National Statistics reported that 26% of young people (and one third of young women aged 16 – 24) reported symptoms of anxiety or depression (Rees, 2020). If students were becoming increasingly anxious, what could we – what should we - do about it?

During the pandemic, research has focused on how anxiety affects student wellbeing, but in 2018, studies seemed out of touch and out of date. In 1981, Tomlinson notes that students entering college writing programs frequently exhibited anxiety about the writing process as well as “reluctance to engage in writing activities” (24), while 2001’s *Understanding Writing Blocks* suggests:

“Psychologists and writing teachers often use the term *writer’s block* interchangeably with the term *writer’s anxiety*, on the unexamined assumption that emotions such as fear are the underlying causes of a writing block. Yet blocked writers are not always anxious writers. Some, in fact, are quite calm and have no noticeable fear of writing itself. In many other cases anxiety appears likely to be the *effect* of a block, not the cause” (Hjortshoj 2).

What was the source of student reluctance? If anxiety was the effect of writing difficulties, how could we address its cause? Anxieties which only relate to writing are considered “transient or situation-specific” (Zhang & Rahimi 2014) and therefore, perhaps, more manageable and fixable. In the belief that we can “alleviate students’ anxiety through teaching effective writing knowledge” (Zhang 2019), I wondered if a writing group that focused on knowledge and skills could help.

As a community writer who has worked in schools, art centres, and prisons for more than twenty years, I knew how to start and run creative writing groups for all ages and abilities, but I had yet to do so at the university level. My work had so far focused on engaging reluctant learners, but here were students who had chosen to come to university to study writing – only to find that they could not write. I wanted to know: was anxiety causing writers' block – or was a perceived inability to write causing their anxiety? I asked the Programme Director if I could create a drop-in workshop space for new first year students to offer academic support any who were struggling. Fortunately, she liked the sound of it and added 25 hours to my sessional contract, as a PAT (Personal Academic Tutor) to start a pilot project group for one year.

In my first session, two first-year male students turned up. A modest beginning to be sure, but it was a start. Through the semester they came back every week, bringing work for formative feedback on grammar, presentation, and structure. We worked on punctuation and got to know each other. Their confidence grew, as they realized that their work would be received with compassion, and my confidence grew too. Slowly, things began to change. Over time, they began to bring their own creative work for feedback: not the short plays they had to write for my module, but things they were writing for themselves: ghost stories, adventures, ideas for films. At first, they presented this work shyly, not knowing what the rules were. I didn't know what the rules were either, but I followed their enthusiasm. We made them up together as we went along.

By the end of the first semester, we were a tight trio. Through the second semester, another few students joined. Their self-confidence grew – as did their marks. The following year, the university offered me another 25 hours to carry the project on, and I became a lecturer in my own right. By autumn 2019, I had a growing group of regulars, returning second-year students as well as a couple of brave new first-years. We sat together in a physical circle and talked about writing – for assessment and ourselves. Sometimes, there were more of us than could fit in the room. Over time, they volunteered their feelings, began speaking openly about anxieties and struggles. Members of the group became increasingly invested in each other's wellbeing as well as their writing. Students continued to be anxious, sure, but they could find comfort in common ground. Safe in our circle, we made plans for the new year.

No one knew what was coming in 2020. The pandemic changed everything – for everybody – overnight. Of course, it did. No longer could we meet - in circles or physical spaces. Students were put into year-specific bubbles, so our group was split. The campus

emptied, students hurried back to families and home countries, and classes moved haphazardly online. I was overwhelmed by new tasks and methods, struggling to master Teams and Blackboard Collaborate, trying to balance software with pedagogy, module by module. There were hours of lectures to be recorded, and I put The Writing Circle into hibernation. I had to. Now, I was the one too anxious to engage.

Working online was a shock to all of our systems. Lagging and rebuffering made students self-conscious. I spent days lecturing at the kitchen counter to black squares and silence, begging for emojis to gauge if anyone was there. I missed my students, but I didn't blame them for switching off. Teaching through the screen, I felt how hard I was leaning in. How could I reach them? Everything felt awkward, and engagement was next to non-existent. I felt instinctively that the need for The Writing Circle was greater than ever.

Initially I had thought anxiety could be conquered through a mastery of craft, and then I had learned it could be eased by talking about it, but Covid-19 changed the sources of anxiety for much of the population. Was anyone not anxious? I hoped our writing group could just help us to feel better, if I could figure out how to run it online. I was also worried that anxiety might stop students writing entirely; I was having trouble staying creative myself. As the university put measures in place to assure students about their marks, anxieties eased a little. What began to emerge was a need for continuity, community, and hope.

Writing can be a therapeutic practice, whether done individually or in a group (Bolton 2006). As a lecturer, I was invested in helping students to develop their abilities, to improve and to make excellent work despite anxiety, but I began to realize that I was as interested in how students felt *while* writing as *about* their writing. I thought we might all improve how we felt by writing it down. I wanted to recapture that old feeling we'd had of sitting in a circle – even if it was online.



## The Stay-at-Home Writing Circle

Volume 1 | Issue 1

Staying at home? Me too. Let's write anyway.

*Want to learn more about Morning Pages? [Visit my site!](#)*

### Prompt 1: MORNING PAGES

Morning! Even in lockdown, my days begin with Morning Pages. (You might remember me talking about them in Induction Week, way back when.) They can happen in the morning – or whenever your “writing day” begins, if you’re a night writer. Morning Pages prime the pump to get your brain and fingers going; they help you fill blank pages so you have something to work with later. Your first prompt is to experiment with Morning Pages – when and how you do them. Try them first thing in the morning, as you’re coming to. Write 3 pages in your journal (or 750 words on your computer) and ground yourself through your senses: this is particularly valuable when you’re stuck in a familiar place. What can you see? What can you hear? What can you smell? What can you taste? What can you touch – and what is touching you? Think of pressure/sensation/temperature/ light, etc. Then begin to think of distance – as another aspect of touch. Think of the distance between you and other people: who is nearby, who is faraway? What is in that space between you? How much air or light or land or space is it? What fills that space? Fields or motorways? Oceans or longing? Can you write your way across that space to reach someone?

*Can you start a story or monologue with one of these?*

### Prompt 2: FIRESTARTERS – here are some first lines

We could see the fire from here.

You never tell the truth, do you?

She had her coat on inside out.

*Can you write a story or monologue from the point of view of one of these people?*

### Prompt 3: POV – from within a picture

*Why not put it on the Forum and share it at The Writing Circle on Blackboard?*



I made an email offer: a worksheet of prompts that students could access that wouldn't require bandwidth or tech. Kent is a huge county, with significant levels of digital poverty. If they could open an email, they could participate. But the take-up was tiny. It didn't meet the brief of our old group: it didn't feel like a workshop or community. It was more like the workbooks I used to slide under cell doors in the segregation unit at the young offender prison when I worked as a writer-in-residence. If I wanted lockdown to feel less like prison, I'd have to find another method.

Blackboard Collaborate offered a way out. I emailed a link to every creative writing student: first and second years, who knew about group, as well as third years and MA students who did not. I waited, heart in mouth, to see if anyone would come. Never had a woman been happier to see rebuffering. Every student finding a way in through the digital door felt like hope.

As each joined, they met this slide:

## WELCOME!

The Writing Circle is a free writing space for you. You can come and go.

We write to prompts together – and we respond to what we read.

You never have to share any work here. Everything you do is private – and it's yours.

Here online, I'll never call on you or single you out. You choose if or when you have your mic or camera on to be "seen". You're in control.

If you ever decide you do want to share your work, remember that there is a forum in The Writing Circle on Blackboard for that. It's lovely to share early work, when you want to.

On Blackboard, you'll also find a big resource bank of things to write and read and listen to and do. You'll also find these online sessions, written up as prompts. That's another way to engage.

I wanted students to know that they were in charge. There was so little else they could control. If they wanted to be silent and unseen, with cameras and sound off, that was fine with me. In modules, there was reluctance to have cameras or mics on. Students said they were broken, which might have been true. It was probably truer to say they just didn't want to be seen. I decided it didn't matter for The Writing Circle. Only I would switch on. My screen would be a window, letting them into my home and writing practice. I didn't need to be able to see "in". The only thing I asked for was an emoji at the start of any session to let me – and each other – know where moods were. There were lots of thumbs down and unhappy faces, but that helped us to find common ground.

Sessions began with simple sensory prompts to root us in time and space. Routinely, I had used such exercises to help students with scene setting and world building, but the more I read about anxiety in the time of COVID-19, I learned the practice is also a tool for anti-anxiety and coping during panic attacks (Young Minds 2020). We ground through the senses to calm ourselves and to be present:

SEE: What can you see? What can you see around you? We have become too used to seeing the same things: screens, kitchens, beds. What can you see with fresh eyes? Find a window. Look up – look out – look away – and breathe. How far can you see?

HEAR: What can you hear? Is it silent? Are you alone? There might be birdsong, the drone of my voice, the scratch of pens or tapping of keys. Can you hear others, where you are? Are they close or far away? How far can you hear? Whenever the wail of ambulances cuts through the sound of seagulls, we register it: send it a silent prayer.

SMELL: What can you smell? Everything is over-familiar. It all smells of sanitizer. I ask students to find something with a scent, to light a candle or rub a plant. I remind them that smell is our oldest sense; the olfactory bulb's nearness to our brain's

amygdala and hippocampus links scent and memory. Sometimes we try to remember things and places we cannot smell right now.

TASTE: What can you taste? Students add what they have to the chat bar: tea, coffee, Pot Noodles or toast. There might be shame in letting others see our chaotic kitchens and bedrooms, but it soon becomes a badge of honour to be living on pantry food and doing without. We also talk about how emotions can have a taste: fear, regret, disappointment, bitterness. Some students feel able to add those to the chat bar too.

TOUCH: What can we touch? We re-establish our grip on pens and keyboards. We place our feet on solid ground, carpeting, and beds. We dig in deeper: what touches us? We remember that we are supported by our chairs, as well as our practice – and each other. We go further in, into our clothing and our bodies, into our skin and bones to note where there are fears and discomfort. How can we find more ease in ourselves – and how can we seek it in our writing? There is such loneliness, so little touch. I don't know how this digital space can recreate it, but I try.

Sessions were designed to stand alone. There was no register – I gave no comment on who came or didn't. Everybody got the same hello, whether they had come before or not. As a project, The Writing Circle was no longer interested in improvement or anxiety about writing. Now, it was just to keep us writing through an anxious time.

There would be simple prompts, first lines to get them going. I would put a line on a slide and set the timer for 5 minutes:

*She wasn't expecting that.*

*It was in the corner.*

*No one knew it.*

*He opened it.*

*They could see it from here.*

*Where did it go?*

*It is falling.*

*You hold it in your hand.*

Opening lines could help beginning writers to start something new, as well as to help more advanced writers find a fresh angle on a work-in-progress. I would remind students that they can change any tense or POV to reinforce the idea that they were in control of their voice. It was also a little Trojan Horse opportunity to slip in bits of grammar.

Sometimes, we played word games. I had jars of nouns and decks of cards, like the Literary Witches Oracle (Kitaiskaia 2019) or the Tarot. With a first line, such as "*The door is*

*open*”, I would throw out a word a minute for writers to catch: *moon, fox, key, milk, finger, wing, dress*. These simple words could be used literally or metaphorically – as nouns as well as verbs. I didn’t ask writers to share their work, but I did ask them to share how it felt to write. We weren’t invested in the product – only the process. Often, students remarked that writing fast made them focus. They could forget about the pandemic or their circumstances for a while. There was a lot of laughter in the chat bar at the wild leaps stories had to make to “fit” the words in. Games like these also helped to stress how individual we all are as writers, creating vastly different stories from the same set of words.

We created characters from details like shoes or the contents of pockets. We created scenes through “Pic’n’Mix” prompts. I asked students to pick two numbers between 1 - 10 and report them in the chat bar for accountability. Numbers gave them corresponding settings and situations:

FIRST NUMBER: SETTING

- 1: Supermarket
- 2: Library
- 3: Nightclub
- 4: Gym
- 5: Rowboat
- 6: Church
- 7: Closet
- 8: Bathroom
- 9: Hospital
- 10: Forest

SECOND NUMBER: SITUATION

- 1: Squeezing avocados
- 2: Reading something you shouldn’t
- 3: Dancing by yourself
- 4: Boxing your own shadow
- 5: Fishing – you feel a tug on your hook
- 6: Praying out loud
- 7: Hiding from someone
- 8: Plucking your eyebrows
- 9: Waiting to be seen
- 10: Running – away from or toward something

It was silly writing, but it helped us to remember and imagine other places than our lockdown rooms.

Over time, I invited writers to offer their own prompts, to share an object or photograph to inspire a story for someone else. We practiced bibliomancy, opening books at random to find a sentence to use for a prompt or to offer to another. It was a low-stakes way of asking students to engage, and a sense of community was created through this giving and receiving of ideas and of words. These were creative prompts that they could use at any time.

I became increasingly interested in “the tension between catharsis and craft” (Robinson 2000), mine and my students. If this group was really going to address wellbeing, we would



have to grapple with it. I began to look for exercises that would help us to build empathy and courage. For empathy, we often worked on POV and the senses. Because so many of us were writing in unusual or awkward spaces, we looked for something out of place. We would capture the object through their senses, to consider the world from the POV of a dirty dish or a bottle of Fairy Liquid. We practiced letting the objects perceive us, the fragile humans holding them. How did we look and smell and sound to them? Our only objective was to write with empathy. It was surprisingly moving to let ourselves be seen by someone/something else and not to be judged, to let our human vulnerabilities be seen by a mask or a bottle of hand soap.

When things must have felt particularly scary, I started a session with a question: are you scared? I told them I was too, but I also tried to remind them that we had lived through scary times already. I asked them what we should do with our fear. Where could we put it? How could we keep writing through it? In my fear, I turned to the wise writers who were my mentors, my touchstones. I found in Toni Morrison's essay 'Peril' in *Mouth Full of Blood* this quote: "I have been told that there are two human responses to the perception of chaos: naming and violence" (2019). As I did not want our chaos to be violent, I asked the group if we could name the things that frighten. Inspired by Morrison and poet Emily Berry's "Some Fears", I asked us to write with tiny and fierce specificity: "Fear of breezes; fear of quarrels at night-time; fear of wreckage; fear of one's reflection in spoons; fear of children's footprints" (2016). We all made lists of the things that truly frightened us, in a time when we were made to be afraid of breath, saliva, bodies. We shared the most ridiculous – or our most painful – items in the chat bar. For many, the biggest fear was that the world would always be like this, no matter how many times I said it wouldn't be.

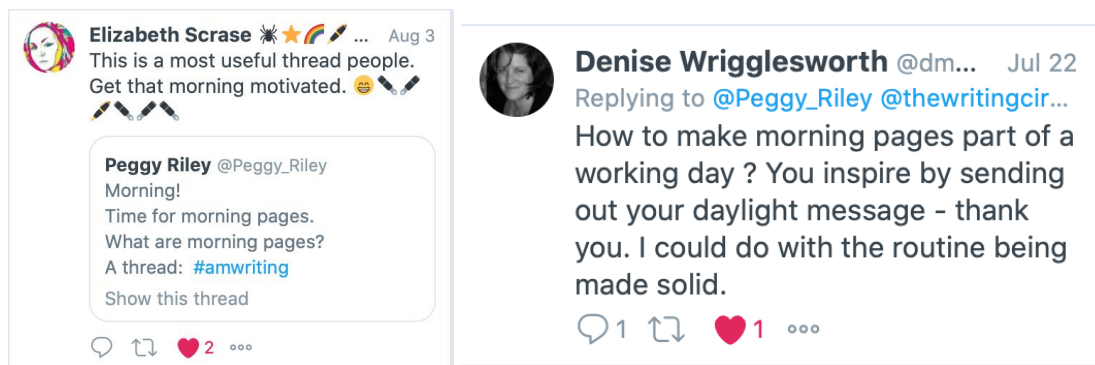
To counter this fear, I asked the group to make the same kind of list about hope, to offer a hope for every fear we listed. As we looked at the words they chose, side by side, I began to feel a little shift – in the group and in me. This was creative writing, but it was addressing wellbeing – actively. We were writing about and through our feelings, beautifully.

Through the summer, we continued to write responses to the work of other writers: Sylvia Plath, Kathleen Jamie, Mary Oliver, Wendell Berry. We wrote in – and out – of our various comfort zones in style, form, genre. I began to experiment with more thematic offerings. On *Dalloway Day*, we experimented with ideas from Virginia Woolf, who made her own connections between writing and mental health, noting a 'whole nervous breakdown in miniature' from a Tuesday state of exhaustion when she "avoided speech; could not read. Thought of my own power of writing with veneration, as of something incredible, belonging

to someone else; never again to be enjoyed by me.’ By Friday, she notes ‘slight activity of the brain’ and on Saturday, “Thought I could write.’ As she tracks her returning health, she finally finds the power ‘to make images’(Woolf 95-96). We experimented with stream of conscious writing and free indirect to make our own Dalloway Days in our gardens.

For the Solstice, we worked on structure: the halfway point of the year felt like a good time to talk about the midpoint in a story or a project. How could we find a pivot to increase narrative drive? It felt like we could all use more propulsion by this point in the year. There were sessions on the power of words, magic, and writing in nature, whether in our gardens or simply near a window, for those who were shielding. We wrote about secrets and saying the unsayable, in a group where no thought or feeling was unwelcome. We wrote about time. One week we considered curiosity, looking at how literature treats the curious protagonist, rewarding Alice’s tumble into Wonderland while cursing Eve and Pandora. We wrote new stories for modern-day Pandoras who had to choose whether to open a box, a letter, or email. Would it let out secrets or infection?

We wrote through every lockdown. At the start of each one, I asked students to increase their writing time, to lean harder into their work and feelings. I began to run #lockdownpages on social media to see if students would meet the challenge of starting a morning pages practice, even in isolation, knowing that they were writing with a community online. The feedback was good.



One MA student participant began a lockdown journal which she wrote as a morning pages exercise and has continued to keep it: she says it has been an important tool for maintaining her mental health (Atkinson 2021).

Through 2020, attendance continued to grow. New students joined in. I grew in confidence as well, unafraid now to address wellbeing directly. Somehow, the screen became more permeable. It no longer felt as if it were something standing between me and the group; it had become an open window or a conduit, the thinnest layer of skin. Even if this intimacy

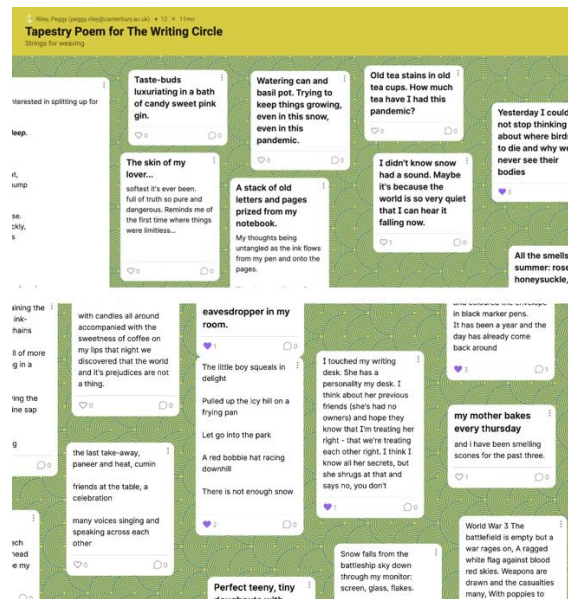
was digital, it was still intimate. It felt like we all understood the tools at our disposal: break out rooms, polls, emojis. Though the screens continued to take their toll on mental health, I felt more confident than ever. When one MA student told me that I made it feel “completely natural to be online” it felt like a major achievement. It still does, even if it is a sad one.

Through the autumn, there were sessions on planning, before things took a spooky turn toward Samhain and Halloween with ghostly prompts and gentle writing on loss. As the year swung around, we gave each other virtual Christmas gifts: kind words, supportive feedback, memories. We wrote about sources of light and rituals, family and cultural, before we wrote our way into a hopeful new year, eager to leave 2020 behind. In 2021, we wrote about love through online Valentines and celebrated Irish poetry and drama for St Patrick’s Day. We wrote ourselves back around again to spring, still online together.

To mark our first anniversary of writing together online, we created a collaborative poem together made from basic sensory prompts to explore feelings and memories of lockdown:



Students were invited to post their pandemic lines anonymously into a Padlet. A poem was stitched together from the writers’ pool of words.



It is called “a year of this”:

*a year of this*

In the last part of the story of my life,  
I met you for Mexican food;  
sipped coffee as I entered the theatre;  
that last take-away, paneer and heat,  
cumin; all the smells of summer:  
rose, honeysuckle, sweat pea.  
The taste of my best friend's Bolognese,  
a warm fondu, friends at the table,  
a celebration: the cheese board, all laid out,  
1:05AM.

I thought it would be the chillies I miss,  
but it's the heat of the bodies,  
the press of strangers squeezing past.  
It was my first day of tech,  
(perfect teeny, tiny doughnuts with candyfloss;  
a hyper-refined taste of the fair)  
I didn't realise it would be my last.

See:

for a year, I have only seen the four walls of  
isolation,  
parted from human touch. There is bird song, now,  
old tea stains in old tea cups  
and candy-sweet pink gin.  
I'm trying to keep things growing, ongoing,  
watering can and basil pot.  
My grandmother's famous apple crumble,  
hands sticky with marmalade  
(this is my 54<sup>th</sup> loaf of bread)  
and I'll make a cake from anything I can catch,  
anything that's standing still.

I trace the shoreline with my viewfinder.  
The birds don't know what we're doing:  
teaching ourselves back-stitch, chain-stitch,  
maybe make-a-wish stitch,  
watching rocket launches (west north west  
out my bedroom window), trapped  
in the prison of the 21<sup>st</sup> century student house;  
front line work, sitting at my writing desk,  
stacked royal blue reading books with deep navy  
writing,  
old letters and thoughts untangled, ink flowing—  
the birds are chirping in my garden,

and then there is snow.

Snow falling heavier than it has for days,  
from battleship sky to icy hill.  
Keeping me indoors with steaming hot chocolate,  
staining the window, tracing ink-washed island  
chains.  
Fresh roses on a chilly spring morning,  
first flakes carrying the ozone tang of pine sap and  
sea—  
I didn't know that snow had a sound.  
The little boy squeals in delight  
(my nephew's photo, smiling at me from a different  
time),

and the mineral smell of more to come  
hangs in a white sky.

I touch the Valentine's Day card I made  
with my own two hands;  
the skin of my lover the softest it's ever been.  
It has been a year  
and the day has already come back around.

In an online session, I read it aloud and asked writers to share in the chat bar when they recognised a line of their own, and it was lovely to see the screen fill with emojis – hearts,

smiles, tears. It felt like something sacred made from all our love and fear. I sensed the hunger for them to share this work, and I asked if they would like to make their work public.

Yes, they said. They would. Anxiety had been replaced by quiet confidence.

Flushed with success, I decided we were ready to create an anthology – this time, with their names. We went back to an old prompt: what do you see? I asked students to offer objects that could serve as prompts. We took an online poll for the winner: a deck of cards. The anthology would respond to the idea of a card, whatever the word inspired. I set a deadline for one-page pieces to be turned in after Easter, hoping the goal would keep students writing through the break, so that I could take one myself.

Work rolled in. There were poems about Tarot cards, flash fiction about playing cards and feedback forms, and short stories responding to funeral cards, postcards, Valentines. Thought students complained that it was hard to keep work down to one page, they understood why such limitations were in place. Rather than disengaging or giving up, students learned to edit and to cut hard to build a diverse anthology, *Snap!*



Now, writing online together gave students tremendous confidence. Students who would never have willingly shared a piece of work began to write and submit theirs for early feedback as well as asking where else they could submit it. It felt as if major thresholds were being crossed, daily – week by week. Writing through lockdowns and releases, we built a strong cohort of writers at all levels: Level 4 to 7, ages 18 to 50+. Having feared I would not find a way to sustain a group online, it became a stronger community than I'd ever imagined. If there was such a thing as digital intimacy, I believed that we had found it. Safe in our homes and behind screens, the Writing Circle became far more inclusive and accessible than any physical location could have been. It meant that students overseas, as well as those struggling with chronic illness, could participate equally.

In September 2021, we moved back into socially distanced physical classrooms, but I announced that The Writing Circle would stay online. As the world went back to being

“normal”, I believed our “new normal” would continue to be more conducive to writing and wellbeing by creating a space that was both private and shared, one that allowed student writers, however and wherever they are, to engage how and when and where they like.

However, something felt different. As graduating students left, current and new students seemed less keen to attend. Some wanted only face-to-face contact, masked and not; they were all Zoomed out. The Office for National Statistics bore this out (Johnston 2021), but many students were still dealing with situations that kept them house-bound and glued to screens: chronic illness, an inability to travel, caring responsibilities and probably anxiety; others had still not returned to the UK. While staff struggled to manage the range of support plans students needed to help them cope with their changing circumstances, numbers for the Writing Circle began to plummet. Our group dropped from 20+ to 10 and then to single figures. Some weeks, it was just me and a handful of students. I feared it was due to screen fatigue. When we created a digital space that felt genuinely intimate, there had been no other options. Maybe we had bonded through our screens because we had to. Now, I began to worry. Had the group run its course? Or had I lost my touch? How could I make the group inclusive if it wasn't online? With anxiety on the rise again, I dug in and carried on, as is my way.

The small group wrote through autumn and created a collaborative poem about climate crisis to participate in COP26. I suggested that we use a hybrid model, with students working online as well as on campus. Online students responded to sensory prompts about our changing weather and posted lines in the chat bar, while in a classroom, two students and I worked to order and edit them. It felt awkward, but I didn't know how else to work. In the winter, our group was invited to write a set of lyrics for the university's Jubilee celebration with the theme of “light-giving”. Online together, we wrote about sources of light and how we needed them in times of darkness. Our song, “Find Your Light” was set to music for a choral piece, and we prepared as a group to attend its premier, before the rise of a new variant cancelled indoor celebrations; its premier was delayed as so much else had been.

## Find your light

CCU Writing Circle

David Knotts

**With energy**

♩ = 120

**A** *f bold and triumphant*

Light chan-ges shape as it moves a-long my hand  
*f bold and triumphant*

Light chan-ges shape as it moves a-long my hand  
*f bold and triumphant*

Light chan-ges shape as it moves a-long my hand  
*f bold and triumphant*

Light chan-ges shape as it moves a-long my hand

By spring 2022, participation in The Writing Circle was at its lowest, and I felt demoralised. Had I run out of ideas? Were the sessions just not good enough? But how could I let it go? I still didn't want to take away the online offer, but I also didn't want to keep putting in hours of prep when attendance was so low. Most disappointing was a lack of interest from the new first years, whose wellbeing I was targeting in a new module, Writing and Wellbeing. Only a handful of them attended, and I saw a real boost of confidence for them, but I wanted more engagement. I told myself that, perhaps, these students felt supported enough through the module and their PAT hours. I told myself a lot of things, but the writing group didn't feel like a success anymore. Maybe we were all just running out of steam.

Our last Writing Circle of the academic year was a hybrid session. It was my last experiment: given the option to attend online and on campus, what would students choose? I invited a guest writer, Zoe Gilbert, to read from her new novel, *Mischief Acts*, and speak about her work. To prepare, I ran an online session to get students writing their own responses to myths, and a small but enthusiastic group took my prompts and ran with them. I felt that old hope stirring in me, and I threw myself into publicising the event. On the big day, Zoe was ill, so she had to attend online. That was no problem – I figured she would have lots of company there. I set up a room on campus, wiping tables, propping open doors and windows, crossing all my fingers to see who would turn up where. The event itself went smoothly – we're all dab hands at presenting hybrid events now, managing audiences in real and virtual spaces together – but attendance was inconclusive. I had 3 in the room and 3 online. Zoe was gracious, but I was grateful not to have pulled her onto campus for such a low turnout. It was a relief to finally thank everyone, wish them well for the summer, and logoff for the last time. Finally, even I was tired of smiling at a screen.

In 2018, I wanted to understand the range of reasons why students might experience anxiety or feel anxious. Now in 2022 we all know more. Mind.org reports that 88% of the young people they surveyed “experienced mental distress during or before the coronavirus pandemic” (2021). People who had struggled before struggle more now. Young people find it increasingly hard to cope. While many feel hopeful, anxiety remains, and people in general need more support.

We’re not done with Covid-19 – and it’s not done with us. How will we handle the next variant? And the next? How can we stay nimble as teachers and practitioners, so that the work we’re doing really helps and really matters? I’m still unpicking all the ways I coped and didn’t through the pandemic. The Writing Circle taught me that staying engaged to others and to my own practice helps me to stay resilient, creative and flexible. It helps me to stay human and vulnerable. Having started this group to tackle student anxiety, I found it helped when I experienced it myself. I want to keep the raw humanity we found in each other when we were afraid and not coping. I don’t want to go *back* there, but I don’t want to deny that we *were* there. We have all been changed – and we will all keep changing.

So, what’s the future of The Writing Circle? Come autumn, I’ll be propping doors and windows open in a seminar room for the group to come back onto campus. Our university wants us to work face-to-face, but I’ll still be logging on for those who can’t. Having said that I would let students vote on how to attend the final session, I’ve come to realize that they did. I had thought a split vote of 3-3 was inconclusive, but it was actually a vote for both. We need to be on campus – and we need to be online. The future is hybrid, for me.

I want to continue to cultivate digital intimacy. The online tools we put in place can continue to keep us safe and engaged. However Zoomed out we might feel, we shouldn’t abandon practices that help everyone to participate. Yes, I’m tired of screens, but I don’t want to let go of what they help us to do. Digital poverty remains an issue, but so do a range of others: a lack of transport, chronic illness, caring – and still – anxiety. In The Writing Circle, I will continue to offer prompts that stimulate creativity, compassion, and collaboration. I will continue to ask students to write about and through their feelings, rather than to deny them or let them derail their writing. I will continue to be honest about my own, and to find new sources of hope.

Anxiety is still on the rise. Students are reporting ever-increasing mental health concerns (UCAS), and we will have to continue to find new ways to help them cope, for beyond Covid-19 are other threats, from wars to climate collapse. Recently, Rebecca Solnit launched a new climate project, Not Too Late. On the website’s homepage is a quote by



Václav Havel: “Hope is not the conviction that something will turn out well, but the certainty that something is worth doing no matter how it turns out.” The only way I know how to stay hopeful is to write my way through and to encourage students to do so. It *is* worth doing, no matter how it turns out.

On a last, happy note, I’m still in contact with my first two students from The Writing Circle, back in 2018. Both are writing, thriving, and completing MA courses: one in creative writing and one in screenwriting. I am fiercely proud of them and of all of The Writing Circle writers who kept going through it all.

Let’s all stay hopeful – and keep going.

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