

Practical Learning with Mallory Tater

In which courses do you use Practical Learning? And how many students are generally there in the course?

We offer a course called “Preparation for a Career in Writing” (CRWR 430/530) in which we are using a ton of practical and participatory learning. It is offered usually in term one as a hybrid cohort between undergraduates and masters students because we have room for admission, and in term two, it is usually just a delivery to Master of Fine Arts students in our online capacity. The registration in the course is as many as twelve students, and this term I have eight.

What does Practical Learning mean in your discipline/course?

It is basically a concrete engagement with the tools necessary for emerging writers, which is most of our master's students, to feel emboldened and confident to go out and sustain themselves with a writing career outside of school. The practicality and applied aspect of it is reflected in many elements, such as creating materials (for example, a literary CV) together in the class, engaging with promotional and marketing sources by looking at how the students might design their own website, having panel and interview conversations to practice the applied aspect of public speaking, and so on. Practical learning to me is having less abstract content and more concrete elements that will set the students up for success in however they want to forge their writing career.

Why do you incorporate practical learning?

I think particularly in our field, that is, writing, there are so many different avenues to forging and sustaining a successful career. With the multiplicity of genres taught, such as playwriting, screenwriting, video game writing, comic and graphic novel writing, fiction writing, and poetry, the students should be shown these different doors available to them and how they might succeed in a particular endeavor and creative practice. By the end of the course, they are able to alleviate the dry ice around the publishing industry.

I have brought in guests that are published authors and literary agents so that the students can see what that kind of relationship could look like for them. It is about exposing them to the different avenues that they might like to seek out post-graduation and set them up for success when they no longer have the course deadlines in front of them for their writing practice.

How did it work?

There are several assignments all of which give the students an opportunity to experience the practical aspects which they would be able to use when they are facing the industry or the professional world. There is one with which we start the class where the students draft their author biographies. This gets them to start thinking of themselves as writers, not just students studying writing, and I think this assignment is particularly useful for the students at the School of Creative Writing. Author biographies are succinct documents in which you talk about yourself in third person, about the styles in which you write, giving just a little window into who you are when you are submitting your work. Some students already have biographies but for the most part it is still new and talking about yourself in third person can feel clunky and strange, so we work through the anxieties around that. By the end they come out with incremental biographies of different word lengths that they can then insert into different emails and writing and public speaking opportunities.

They say writing is a non-performing art, but you do get asked to be on a stage reading your work, and that is how you promote, connect with community and other industry professionals, and how you sell books, quite honestly. So, another assignment that I have been running for the last couple of years teaching this course is a mock writers festival. This involves having several different topics of panels. Some topics that we did last term were writing during the climate crisis, writing about protagonists who move us, and looking at the discrepancy of labeling genres, such as young adult and adult. The topics range from creating compelling characters, to which genres they like to work in, to how they might engage with activism in their work. I get the students to sign up for the topic they are interested in, and they physically meet with their group and share each other's work and knowledge. Then each group goes in front of the class, and we have conversations with me moderating (as an author on the stage with them). This forces them to be able to practically speak to their creative work, because a lot of students are just used to facing the page and not necessarily advocating for those elements. Although the folks who are less excited by public speaking do have to fight a few nerves to get up there, I always feel like we learn so much about each other from these panel activities. We feel connected to one another by the end, and having done a panel before will only going to set them up to say yes to similar future opportunities that they will be asked to do.

All the assignments generally involve creative thinking such as tailoring a curriculum vitae (CV) or a website and working around its aesthetics. With the CV or the writer's resume, we look at different options for how the students can tailor it to their needs and their sense of self, and also consider the ways in which the students might want to network or communicate one another and industry folks. We also look at cover letter writing and the tone of all these documents.

I have an assignment where I ask them to send out a piece for publication to a magazine. I get them to read, research and talk about publishing in journals and magazines, as well as their manuscripts, so they get a clearer sense of the publishing and literary climate by the time they have completed the course. We also look at literary agency representation and what literary contracts look like. Every assignment is scaffolded in a way that will get the students the full package of tools that they will need by the time they graduate.

What did the students share about their experience with the practical learning activities?

Many students register for the course not knowing very much about the industry and come with concerns around a variety of areas such as getting an agent to represent your work, succeeding as a writer, and getting grants and research streams in Canada. By the end of the term, I get a lot of feedback from the students that many of their questions have been answered and that they have the resources they can refer.

How did you assess students' development of Practical Learning skills?

There are nitty-gritty ways to keep tabs on the numbers and academics throughout the course. For example, there are technical categories and aspects which need to be included and formatted to a certain extent when cultivating a CV, and for this I have the students follow a rubric for 10% of their grade. For the panels they get assessed for being enthusiastic, engaged, and prepared, and for the author biographies the grades are based on capturing the requirements, such as the word counts. Grading is participation based as well, with the students being assessed for putting in effort, showing up, supporting one another, etc.

I have not had a ton of students come to me that they are worried about their GPA in the class necessarily, but I do understand that grades are important. Grades helps students get into other programs and with scholarships. So, with that in mind I try to be as transparent as possible while grading and majority of it

is just me showing them a benchmark of the technical requirements and seeing if they can fulfill those expectations.

Do you feel the students achieved your intended learning outcomes for the course?

Yes, I do, and by the end of the course they have concrete evidence to show for it in their author bios, CVs, and cover letters, and it is always celebratory when the students send out their work and receive responses for it. I think the practical learning happening is resulting in an outcome that gets them more confident to leave school when they graduate.

What are some changes or improvements which you wish to include in future?

I have been thinking about the different genres that there are in our discipline, and it is difficult to include some of those because the instructor does not have the background or is not in that field; for example, I do not write for stage. I am hoping to have some more inclusivity of guest speakers and variation over the course of time, so students working in different disciplines can see themselves represented through the different guests that we have. That is definitely a goal of mine to not just have more popular genres, such as fiction, represented with guest speakers.

Another assignment that I want to run in the future is attending a literary event together in Vancouver, which would be an observational look at what that could be like for the students. Watching how authors conduct themselves, taking observations of some of their marketing tools and techniques could be beneficial, in my opinion.

Do you have any suggestions for instructors considering this Practical Learning for their course?

I think that one must think about their discipline and what it looks like on the ground, outside of the classroom, outside of the theory- what does it look like to prepare students for a professional and community environment, and how can the assignments be tailored to help them get their feet wet and learn about the work that they might experience outside of the classroom. Also, it enriches students' learning when we bring professionals to them and help them spark dialogue with experts working in this creative field.

Do you wish to share anything further?

One other module that I think is really important and that more instructors across the board could be doing is considering students' mental health. This module is centered around self-care and care for the students in their role as both a student and an artist. We talk about what it's like to navigate situations such as feeling stuck with an idea, their own mental health, work deadlines, and capitalism-driven fatigue. The module explores how to push through any doubt and fear, to be open to when rest is needed and to begin tailoring ways that nurture each individual's sense of mental health so that they can exhibit the best version of themselves in and out of the professional realm. I always schedule this module around the time in the term when the burnout is high, and we simply talk about ways of letting the creative brain rest and accepting that it is not always going to be generative. We look at essays about self-care such as *On Burnout* By Alicia Elliott and Julia Cameron's *The Artist's Date*.