

## Teaching editing: online approaches to a moving target

Paper presented at Write Edit Index conference, Canberra 6–9 May 2015

Pamela Hewitt



I was going about my business one fine morning in early 2011. I'd been freelancing for many years and had never considered returning to life as a wage slave – I mean employee. I loved the autonomy, the flexibility and the variety of being a freelance editor. I had no interest in giving up the lifestyle or work I loved.

Although I'd started out in the in-house world, a mixture of editing, consultancy and training had supported me and my family for a decade and a half. I'd been in the game long enough that my business had become self-generating. Mostly, work found me through word of mouth and repeat clients. I was always busy but I still kept a lookout for tasty opportunities.

On this day, a job ad on an editing and writing listserv caught my eye. It was for a three-month contract developing and conducting online editing courses. The advertisement seemed to have been written for me.

I shot off an expression of interest to the poster, who rang back immediately. To my surprise, he turned out to be an archaeologist in a Queensland university. When I told him I'd developed my own online courses in professional editing and presented online training programs on writing and editing for universities and government agencies, the good professor sounded extremely relieved. It seemed that there were students impatiently waiting to work on their courses but no lecturer. With dizzying speed, I found myself teaching the Graduate Certificate in Editing and Publishing offered by the University of

Southern Queensland, supervised by an archaeologist. Not everything was to happen so quickly. For most of that first semester I was logged into the discussion forums under the name and photograph of the bearded professor.

I had no shortage of autonomy... On the other hand, you could also say I was thrown into the deep end. There was a lot to learn about university policy, the range of software on the StudyDesk, and I needed to absorb the existing course content, and fast.

Despite the near vertical learning curve, I loved it. It was the best of all worlds for me. I continued to live in Sydney and worked from home, as before. Once or twice a year, I flew to Toowoomba, where I undertook a whirlwind of meetings with academic and support staff: teaching and learning experts, media services people, the learning resources team, librarians and others.

I was encouraged to maintain my freelance profile. The university agreed that it was important that I should stay active in the industry and feed current experience into the courses. This arrangement allowed me to pick and choose the tastiest gigs and manuscripts that came my way. I continued to work with my favourite clients, took on a select few manuscripts that had a strong appeal, and I accepted invitations for national and international workshops and events that helped me keep up with developments in the field. I became skilled at saying no to freelance work that didn't set my heart on fire, a habit I intend to retain.

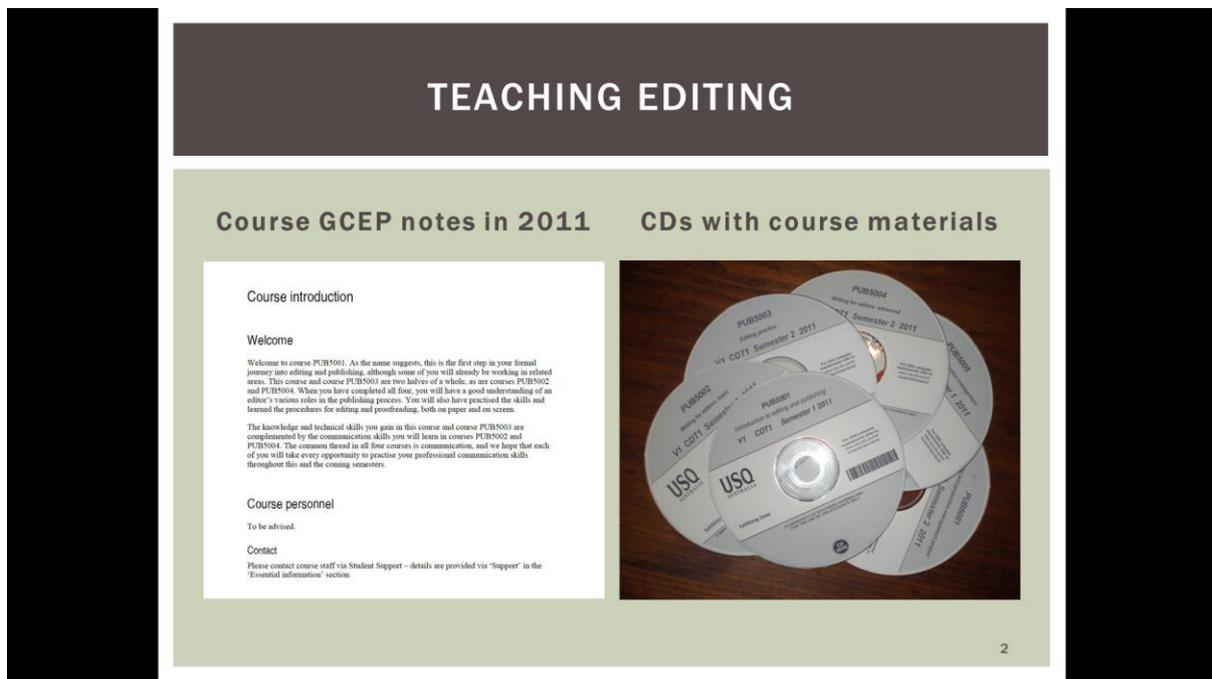
During the first year I worked under contract but at the beginning of 2012, I was invited to apply for a full-time lectureship. My role morphed into a tenured position that had expanded to include teaching Masters courses as well as the Graduate Certificate in Editing and Publishing. Coordinating the Editing and Publishing program at USQ was full on, demanding and fascinating.

This is how I began a four-year stint as an accidental academic. In a way, it's a testament to the advantages of freelancing. When this chance arrived unexpectedly, I was able to take it up immediately. Freelancing involves keeping your fingers on the pulse, keeping an eye on the next big thing. Switching from in-house positions to freelancing and combining them is part of a common pattern for editors. It's not for everybody but in my experience it is a great way to work, combining theory and practice, security and freedom.

I wouldn't be honest if I didn't add that a respectable, regular income was a major incentive, not to mention a generous superannuation package, something only the most disciplined freelancers set aside from their takings. To be precise, these incentives were part of the impetus to take on the initial three-month contract. The reason I stayed for several years was that it was a marvellous opportunity to develop and present an integrated online program in editing and publishing. I had the scope to make a real mark in the field and the students were great.

## The program in 2011

This is how a typical set of course notes looked when I first logged on.



Not exactly user friendly or inviting. The standard distance education course presentation was outdated in publishing and educational terms. I would be teaching about design and typography as well as editing, about the use of colour and balance on the page and screen, about digital editing techniques. The first thing I wanted to change was the bureaucratic look and feel, the unrelenting use of Times New Roman font and the almost entirely black and white presentation.

This was just the beginning of the changes I wanted to make. Of course I wanted to make changes – I'm an editor.

I assumed that I would be able to revise the courses immediately. I was in for a nasty shock. Although the course materials and assessment tasks were available online, any corrections had to be provided to the central distance education area months before courses began. The material was then burnt onto CDs that were sent to students before they started their courses. Worse, I discovered that it wasn't possible to update any errors or broken links once the final version had been locked in two or three months before semester began.

There was also a DVD. Imagine my surprise (and dismay) when I encountered several interview clips with me that had been recorded at the Brisbane conference in 2003. I'd play some of these 'legacy' video clips but the .flv files on the course DVD are no longer supported by either Mac or PC without a workaround... which brings me to another important issue – the rapid obsolescence of the technology. The course materials I

inherited, with a library of audio and video clips, were up-to-the-moment at the time they were developed but times had changed considerably since the course had last been revised.

Content and file format aside, technological change raised problems with devices. By 2011, some students were using their newly acquired iPads, which had no disc drive, as their main learning equipment and from 2012, the flagship iMac computers no longer included disc drives.<sup>1</sup> Clearly, the program needed to adapt to the different ways students downloaded and worked on their course materials.

Assessment tasks were uploaded on the university course portal two weeks before the beginning of semester and students sent their assignments in by mail, on paper. I would receive reams of assignments posted from Toowoomba, and forwarded to my PO Box in Sydney. In that first year, some assignments went astray in various corners of the university or sat in departmental in-trays until someone remembered to forward them to me. Here was another aspect of course administration begging to be updated.

### **Baby steps at ground zero**

So these were my first urgent goals: to revise the way the course materials and assessment tasks were **presented and delivered**. I wanted course materials that looked good and were flexible, incorporating a variety of colour and fonts that suited the purpose of the text. I wanted to embed multimedia files and of course I wanted to fix typos and update information instantly.

Updating the submission of assignments was the easiest aspect to sort out. Initially, I asked students to email their work rather than rely on Australia Post and by the second year I was able to change the course specifications to describe the entire program as **online** rather than **distance education** and to use electronic submissions and marking software (a combination of Gradebook and Electronic Assignment Submission Environment, a program that went by the acronym EASE – a misnomer if ever there was one).

Then there was the **content**. The four courses that made up the Graduate Certificate in Editing and Publishing (GCEP) had undergone a major revision in 2004 but there had been a lot of water under the bridge since then. Amazon's first Kindle had been released in 2007, setting in motion a fundamental disruption of the publishing industry. In 2011, the year I took up the position coordinating the program, Apple's iPad was launched and ebooks really took off.

The whole world of editing and particularly publishing was changing.

Bookshops were closing, starting with Borders (Red Group) at the beginning of 2011, followed by more and more bricks-and-mortar bookshops as the online retail juggernaut and the ebook revolution wreaked havoc on the publishing industry business model.

It wasn't merely a matter of adding information about the digital revolution to augment the existing content. These changes needed to be integrated across the curriculum. It wasn't an option to continue teaching for print publishing using mostly hard copy editing techniques. I had not only to transform the way the materials were delivered, I also had to revise the content from go to whoa.

I would be running to keep up for the entire four years. I know some of my former students are here at the conference. I wonder how many of you realised the frantic work that was going on behind the scenes while I endeavoured to present an image of a cool, calm and collected program coordinator. Those four years were a time of uncertainty and change in the publishing industry and in editing but it was also an era of great promise and creativity. Let's look at the changes made to the program.

## Strengths

First of all, some things didn't need to change. There were some very positive elements to the existing program that I valued and retained, including:

- A practical, hands-on, realistic approach – this was no theoretical course divorced from reality
- An awareness of Indigenous, ethnic and gender issues was integrated throughout – the materials had been written from an awareness of and sensitivity to the diversity of writers, editors, readers and texts
- A good coverage of traditional editing and publishing skills – one of my tasks was to update but there was a solid base from which to work
- A library of video and audio clips, which was ahead of the field at the time it was created.

These strengths were a sound foundation and a tribute to the work of my predecessors, Sharon Nevile and Jennifer Wright, well known and active editors whom some here will know.

There was a good strong core but plenty of areas where I needed to catch up with the events unfolding in the publishing industry. I decided to start with decreasing the attention given to hard copy editing and print-based publishing in order to make room for information on approaches to onscreen editing and digital publishing.

This was just the beginning but I had to start somewhere.

## Flying under the radar

I set to work updating the content. At first I thought that it would be wonderful to have an army of support staff with specialist technical skills. I had developed my own online editing courses unaided, apart from commissioning web development (particularly back end

construction), graphic design and illustration. With on-campus media gurus, graphic designers, photographers and voiceover experts on tap, what couldn't I achieve? Well, as it turned out, a lot of this support was available in theory only.

I could request photographs or template design or animations, but my requests were often stalled in queues that never ended. It was often easier to do it myself. This story will be familiar to everyone who works in higher education, where shrinking budgets and constant administrative demands can grind down the most starry-eyed reformers.

University procedures were quite rigid. To change content required a lot of administrative jumping through hoops and over hurdles. It seemed that whenever I had an idea about new ways to deliver the courses, there was an obstacle in the way. I fumed. I bitched to friends. Finally I thought 'Too bad. My students need these changes. I'm doing it.'

I went ahead with content and delivery changes. Having spent more years than I cared to count in various bureaucracies, I was familiar with the problem and the solution. If you want to get anything done, find a fixer: someone who understands the system and knows how to get around it. This person, this paragon, was by sheer luck allocated to work with me on my courses. I would propose changes. She would say, 'Hmmm. I think we'll let this fly under the radar.' By the end of the four years, using the delightful 'under the radar' approach, I had revised the entire program. Ironically, the entire university has since moved to the method of course updating I had secretly established. By the time I left, my course delivery style was promoted as an exemplar for academics still using the old centralised approach.

Even so, there were constraints. I couldn't change the names of the courses or their components without embarking on an 18-month approval process. So I did what seemed to be the next best thing. I kept the shells of the courses and revamped them from inside while transforming the look and feel.

Rather than sending hard copies or CDs and DVDs through the mail, students could download the course notes, save them and print them if they wished. In some areas of the program, things were moving so fast that I uploaded material throughout the semester, adding up-to-the-minute content and incorporating news stories and rich assets like video interviews as they became available rather than preparing them in advance as stand-alone content on a DVD.

### **Teaching publishing in the digital age**

I emerged at the end of semester 1, shell-shocked but pleased with what I'd achieved overall. My three-month contract was renewed. The good professor, the internationally renowned archaeologist, asked if I'd be prepared to take over the Masters Program and coordinate the entire editing and publishing program. He sent me the files. Same Times New Roman. Same HTML presentation. But this time there was a twist. The course content was woefully out of date. The references were to scholarly articles of little relevance to

contemporary publishing. Some of them had been written fifteen or twenty years earlier. There was no way I could teach this course in its current form.

The professor, a scholar and a gentleman, asked if I could rewrite them. Sure, I said, but not while I am carrying a full-time teaching load. Ah, said he. Did I know anyone else who could update the course? Well yes, I said (you don't survive as a freelancer without a network of mutual allies, mates and colleagues). I received approval to have this Masters course rewritten by Sheila Allison, an editor and publisher with experience developing educational course material.

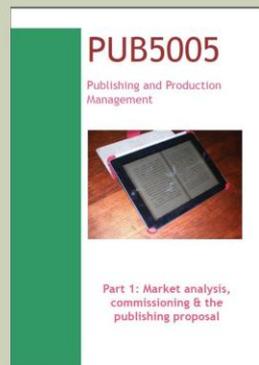
You might think it was a sneaky way of lightening my workload to arrange for a colleague to revise one of my courses. Alas! The topic was Issues in Publishing Technology. I needed to update it dramatically every year thereafter. The old model of course preparation well in advance is simply unviable in this brave new world of digital publishing. Production techniques are changing so rapidly that the shelf life of this particular course is only a few months. There will always be generic skills but factual information about production processes and the business model for publishing doesn't last long. Interviews with key players dated quickly too. This is a subject where the Harbour Bridge analogy holds true.

The slide features a dark grey header with the text 'MASTERS PROGRAM' in white. Below this, the main content area has a light green background. On the left, the text reads 'Masters course notes in 2011' followed by 'Module 1 – Market analysis, commissioning and the publishing proposal'. Underneath, it lists 'Objectives' and a bulleted list of tasks such as 'locate and evaluate sources of publishing data' and 'identify and assess the market(s) for which a new title is commissioned or acquired'. It also includes sub-sections like '1.1 A brief overview of publishing in Australia' and '1.1.1 Types of Australian publishing companies'. A 'Multinationals' section mentions 'the Bertelsmann Group in Germany' and 'Dorland'. A 'Specialists' section mentions 'Publishing companies that have successfully moved to new kind of publishing. Examples:'. On the right side of the slide, there is a portrait of Sheila Allison, a woman with short brown hair and glasses, smiling. The number '3' is visible in the bottom right corner of the slide.

The left-hand side of the slide above shows what the opening passages of one of the Masters courses looked like on day 1. And the next slide is how it looked with colour, images, more attractive fonts as well as interactive components such as video interviews with cutting edge digital publishers.

## REVISED MASTERS COURSE NOTES

### Revised Masters course notes cover



### Revised Masters course notes text



4

Here are a couple of examples of the new material I included using interviews with people who were breaking new ground in digital publishing.

## INTERVIEWS

### Video clips

- *Stuart Buchanan, The Nest Case Study*  
<http://player.vimeo.com/video/63300225>
- *Charlotte Harper, Advice to aspiring editors and publishers*  
<https://vimeo.com/user10756933/review/63142160/56e154f79c>

### Video introduction

- *Course coordinator, Introductory information on two of the courses*  
<https://vimeo.com/user10756933/review/104668188/49e39a6f66>

5

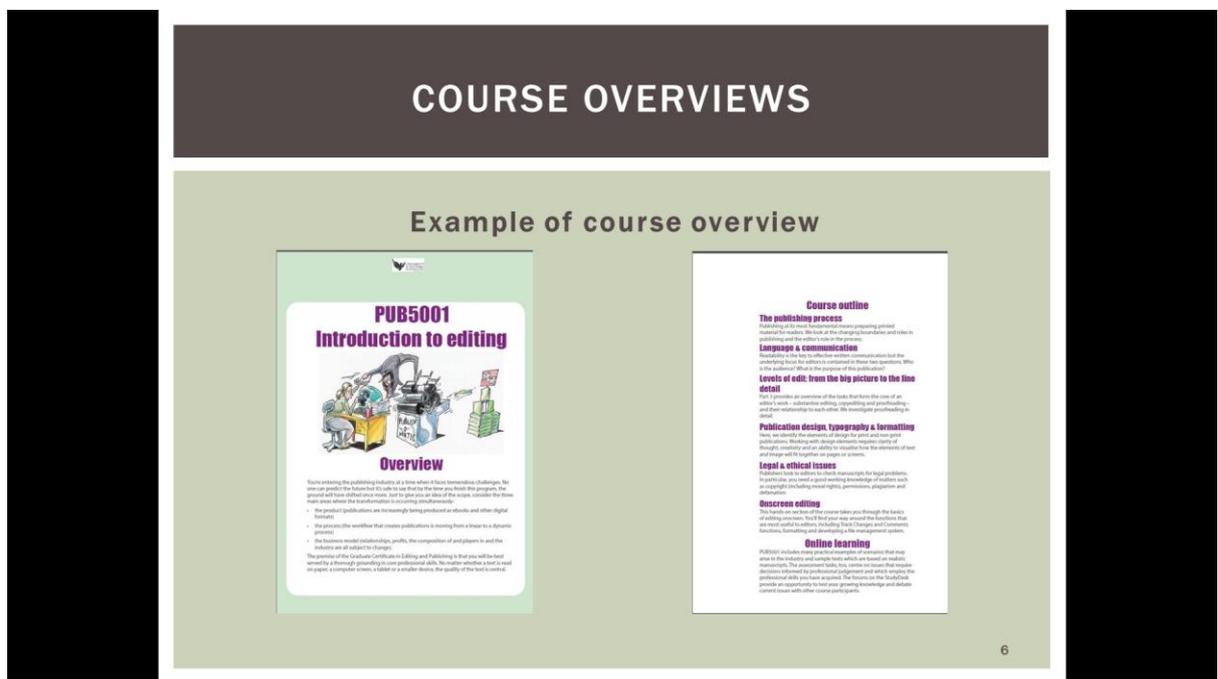
Another semester 2 Masters course required students to take a manuscript through assessment, editing, budgeting, production and marketing. It was a great idea for a project-based course, putting into practice all that the students had learnt to that point in the program and giving them experience in all the stages of production.

But where were the manuscripts? No one knew. Once again, it was down to me. With a couple of weeks before semester started I needed to come up with suitable manuscripts

that students could work on, with permission from the authors. I asked friends, former clients – anyone I could think of with a manuscript that they might agree to make available. I called in favours. I expended considerable professional credit. I don't know how but I managed to develop a bank of texts. During the years that I taught the program, students were able to choose from genres, including self-help, literary fiction (novels, novellas and short stories), fantasy fiction, children's and young adult fiction, academic and educational texts.

Other elements that I incorporated into the program included:

- Written and video outlines of courses and examples of course materials that provided an overview of the program as a whole. (See the video 'Course coordinator, Introductory information on two of the courses' above and the course outline pdf example below.)



- Podcasts that summarised the issues, commented on student queries and discussed that vital issue, assignments. These complemented the posts on the StudyDesk and were another means of personalising the courses.
- Quizzes – editing doesn't lend itself to multiple choice approaches but grammar was an area where some students appreciated the chance to have additional, non-assessed practice.
- Online portfolios – Masters students could choose from a range of open-source platforms such as Wordpress or adopt the university-branded ePortfolio model to develop an online presence that could be used in the industry as a freelancer or an in-house editor, incorporating examples of their work, social media links, blogs and networking components.

- Expansion of some areas of course content, for example onscreen editing techniques, genres such as fiction and expanded coverage of freelance editing. There's always more to be done. Topics for further development include self-publishing and academic editing.
- Reduced coverage of hard copy editing and proofreading techniques. There is a case for removing this completely but while it remains part of the IPEd accreditation exam, it needs to be retained. (A stop press moment on the first day of the conference was the announcement that the exam will move to onscreen techniques, so hard copy editing can now become an elective component.)
- Arranging face-to-face meetings with students. These were not supported by the university but arranged on an ad hoc basis when I was on the road presenting workshops and attending meetings. Over the four years I met with students in Toowoomba, Brisbane, Canberra, Melbourne, Adelaide and Sydney.
- A cross-program online presence. We called this the Editing and Publishing Forum. It worked well for the keen students who used it to network and discuss cross-program issues. Students whose publications were being launched, or whose articles were published posted links on the forum and at the end of the calendar year, students contemplating continuing in the Masters Program asked current Masters students about course expectations and their experiences.

I wasn't the only innovator. Students set up their own Google groups and Facebook pages to commiserate about assignments and decode marking criteria. (I'm guessing here about what went on. I wasn't part of the Facebook group, which is as it should be. Students need a place to speak their mind without teaching staff listening in.)

### Summary of changes

- Delivery of course materials and assessment from distance to online
- Continuous course revision, starting with the GCEP and moving to the Masters courses
- Particular areas were given priority (content of publishing technology courses, for example)
- Materials development and presentation change from HTML to PDF, incorporating embedded videos as well as many more images, colours and fonts
- Inclusion of podcasts, video introductions and face-to-face meetings with the coordinator
- Significant expansion of coverage of fiction, onscreen and digital editing techniques as well as a greater emphasis on freelancing
- Interviews with digital publishers, editors and writers
- Increased enrolments at a time when postgraduate numbers were falling elsewhere in the faculty and there was a slight shift in the male–female ratio (though the program is still predominantly female).

## The future

Although my experience was of the USQ editing and publishing program, the issues raised are more broadly relevant. In other university and tertiary programs, the issues I encountered at USQ have also been present.

I'm going to finish by teasing out five issues that I think editing education needs to address.

1. The future of editing is **international and digital**. In-house and freelance editors alike know that the competition is not confined to our local area but is increasingly global. The same is true for the education 'industry'. Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) are making rapid inroads into the world of education and training and there is a growing trend towards online course provision in Australian universities, colleges and industry groups. This suggests that online provision, already a significant component of editing education, will expand. To ensure that course content is relevant, contemporary and of a high standard, here are some suggested directions for IPEd:
  - Forging links with national and international educational institutions that teach editing, developing cooperative projects and perhaps providing courses
  - This could be done in tandem with progress on the requirements for accreditation. I note that IPEd is investigating options for onscreen delivery for future exams. There is no technical reason not to take this further and offer online accreditation testing.
2. The **online student publication** I mentioned was an initiative I tried to establish in cooperation with USQ's creative writing and journalism programs. While there was not time to get this up and running, there's no reason such an element could not be incorporated into this and other programs in future, either as an elective or a core component. In addition to or instead of working on a student publication, other personal publishing initiatives that met course requirements in terms of scope and quality could be invited. With the ready availability of open-source publishing software, these activities could be incorporated as assessable course components. As well as assessing the quality of the final product, a publication provides experience in and a means of demonstrating essential skills within a team-based environment – a perfect introduction to the publishing industry.
3. **Work experience and internships** proved to be difficult areas. A program such as USQ's enrolled students not only from all over Australia but also internationally. There were students in Japan, the US, Switzerland, Botswana, South Africa and Dubai while I was coordinating the courses. Many lived in remote regions of Australia. One was on a boat in the Caribbean. It would not have been easy to arrange participation in a traditional work experience program. There is a general university industry experience program which safeguards student and industry interests by providing students with a legal agreement and insurance cover available to students who had

sourced their own work experience opportunities and I helped a handful of students to set up internships using this model. Informally, I lined up some opportunities by recommending students to people in my network who were in search of an editor or proofreader. In future, a possible solution would be to devise online work experience and internship opportunities. Given the online nature of the industry and the work, this sort of work experience may be a fruitful path to explore, but it requires time and resources, two commodities in very short supply among Australian university staff.

4. **Platforms and software.** Although I'm ambidextrous, when developing course material, I took the view that Microsoft Word on PC is the industry standard so in the course notes on onscreen editing, the screenshots and commands used the PC environment. Many of the students used Macs but no one seem fazed by the PC platform in the course material. As for other software, it's increasingly important for editors to be across a range of programs, including:
  - InDesign and Photoshop for layout
  - Acrobat Pro especially for proofreading
  - PerfectIt (only available for PCs at the moment)
  - EPUB software
  - Audacity, Soundcloud or similar audio software
  - Dropbox, iCloud or other large file transfer program
  - Skype for collaborative projects and as a teaching tool
  - Wordpress or similar platform for assessment tasks and portfolio development.

Expanding the required range of software capability raises new problems, none insuperable:

- The cost for students who need to purchase additional software, particularly expensive items like Adobe Creative Suite (although the current free Adobe Acrobat reader now includes most of the capability of the Pro version)
  - The need for lecturers to develop and maintain the skills to teach these programs and update course materials and the time additional content takes from other areas of the curriculum
  - Dealing with technological obsolescence
  - Designation of technical topics as core or elective course components as not every student wants to develop these skills.
5. **Watering down of specialist editing programs.** The advertisement for my position called for expertise in 'editing, publishing *and creative writing*'. I wish my successor well. I hope that the program will continue to provide a practical, innovative and thoughtful place to study the important issues that the course covers. When I took

on the job, I really had my skates on getting on top of the rapid developments in publishing. If I had had to dilute my effort to include a major emphasis in creative writing I might have collapsed in a heap. There is no shortage of creative writing programs in Australian universities. At last count there were at least 19,<sup>2</sup> including the relatively recent one at USQ. There are 15 editing programs listed on the IPEd website<sup>3</sup> but a number of these include editing and publishing as a minor component of professional or creative writing courses.<sup>4</sup>

Finally, I want to pay tribute to the people who made it all worthwhile. Many USQ students are here at Write Edit Index. I'd like to thank you for your patience and enthusiasm and for all I learnt from you.

## Notes

---

<sup>1</sup> The first iPad was released on April 3, 2010 and the 2012 iMac had no disc drive. See <<http://edition.cnn.com/2012/12/06/tech/innovation/imac-disc-drive/index.html>>.

<sup>2</sup> Creative writing programs in Australian universities <<http://www.studydiscussions.com/creative-writing-courses-in-australia/>> and <<http://www.studydiscussions.com/creative-writing-courses-in-australia/>>

<sup>3</sup> Editing programs in Australian universities <[http://iped-editors.org/Employment1/Careers\\_in\\_editing.aspx#uni](http://iped-editors.org/Employment1/Careers_in_editing.aspx#uni)>

<sup>4</sup> For example the University of Canberra offers editing as part of a Graduate Certificate in Professional Writing, UNE includes a small editing component in its Writing program and the University of Queensland Writing Editing and Publishing program is another example of a program where editing takes up less than half of the course load.