

Work in Progress - Novel Writing in a College of Engineering

Craig Gunn

Michigan State University, gunn@egr.msu.edu

Abstract - While most schools are doing a remarkable job in providing a technical education to their engineering students, many of these schools are not opening up the horizons for students to cultivate needed skills in the more arts and letters areas. Students who arrive at institutions across the United States come with talents far exceeding their engineering abilities. They play musical instruments, they sing, they produce movies, and they write. While commonly assumed to be only science and math focused, in actuality they are overflowing with these “other” abilities. As schools begin teaching these students it is necessary to cultivate those “other” abilities. The latest activity in the College of Engineering at Michigan State University is to involve students in the act of writing novels, an activity that some might think is both impossible and fruitless. The idea for this novel writing activity began with the National Novel Writing Month, which is “a fun, seat-of-your-pants approach to novel writing. Participants begin writing November 1. The goal is to write a 175-page (50,000-word) novel by midnight, November 30.” It was an easy process to go from an individual writing activity to a group focused process. It is hoped that as the years go by, the activity will continue as a team activity and expand to many individual attempts at completing individual novels. Every student who graduates as an engineer will be required to communicate in written and oral forms. By providing a variety of forms of writing to our students, we will be able to stimulate their abilities and creativity. In this novel writing exercise, the rationale to use it within an engineering setting is provided. Every college of engineering and departments within those colleges should be interested in how they can foster writing activity in their students. Novel writing, while an ages’ old activity, is new to engineering and should be investigated. The beginnings of the process, ways of motivating students, and assessments of this early work will be provided in the text.

Index Terms – Novel Writing, Communication, Writing

The Process

The inspiration for starting the novel writing process began with a simple invitation from the National Novel Writing Month (NaNoWriMo) aficionados who each year encourage writers from around the world to sit down, standup, or lie

Pittsburgh, PA

down on the floor and make every attempt to write 50,000 words in the month of November. This equates to approximately 1,666 words per day for the entire month, ending with a successful endeavor and the completed novel. As NaNoWriMo puts it:

- Valuing enthusiasm and perseverance over painstaking craft, NaNoWriMo is a novel-writing program for everyone who has thought fleetingly about writing a novel but has been scared away by the time and effort involved.
- Because of the limited writing window, the ONLY thing that matters in NaNoWriMo is output. It's all about quantity, not quality. The kamikaze approach forces you to lower your expectations, take risks, and write on the fly.
- Make no mistake: You will be writing a lot of crap. And that's a good thing. By forcing yourself to write so intensely, you are giving yourself permission to make mistakes. To forgo the endless tweaking and editing and just create. To build without tearing down.
- As you spend November writing, you can draw comfort from the fact that, all around the world, other National Novel Writing Month participants are going through the same joys and sorrows of producing the Great Frantic Novel. Writers meet throughout the month to offer encouragement, commiseration, and—when the thing is done—the kind of raucous celebrations that tend to frighten animals and small children.
- In 2008, we had over 120,000 participants. More than 20,000 of them crossed the 50k finish line by the midnight deadline, entering into the annals of NaNoWriMo superstardom forever. They started the month as auto mechanics, out-of-work actors, and middle school English teachers. They walked away novelists. [1]

For anyone who is trying to get students interested in writing and bringing communication elements into engineering, anyone who believes that writing is vital in engineering but who have many students who need something unique to peak their attention, the free wheeling activity of the adventure of participating in this novel writing

Session 4A

activity is exciting. If carefully done, this activity can require only as much effort as a student wishes to provide.

Writing a novel individually can take years for the average writer. Spending an enormous amount of time, and grueling time at that, can sap the energy of even the most daunting of writers. This was a major concern in getting the novel writing started so in order to keep interest high and time at the minimum, the only thing asked of the students was that they try with as much effort as they could to write 1,000 words or as it was called, one chapter. Since most students are used to producing papers of much greater length, the word count was not insurmountable. For those students who felt that they could produce much more than the 1,000 words, there was no restriction on length, so it appeared that everyone could be happy with only having to produce what they felt was enough.

The word went out to seek anyone interested in participating in the project. Over 60 students expressed interest and a number of characters were named and a location chosen well before the November 1, 2009 beginning date. Many started thinking about the production before November 1 and with it the first concerns began to rumble. Many wanted to know much more about the location, an island. They wanted to know in what year it was taking place. They wanted information on each of the characters. They also didn't want to be forced into a specific chapter. They just wanted to write. Almost immediately it was decided to provide all the writers with the barest of facts to compress the stories into some semblance of order.

Quickly a set of better instructions and more clearly defined characters were presented to all who were already signed up and many more who had since expressed interest.

YOU ARE GOING TO WRITE A NOVEL!

You have been selected and encouraged to become part of a Great Adventure, the creation of a novel! The novel will be the brain child of 50 individuals or more who will weave their tale in a 50,000 word spectacular! The whole novel will be created during the month of November 2009. In that month you are asked to contribute at least 1,000 words to the effort. Your 1,000 words (more if you desire) will comprise one chapter in the adventure. So what do you need to do?

First - make the commitment to write 1,000 words in a month. (Yes, that adds up to about 35 words a day. The text above consists of 107 words! So if I had started writing I would be 10% of the way to completion. Go figure, this is not a monstrous task!)

Second - use the following characters – You can use some or all in your chapter.

Bob - 20 year old white male

Mary – 20 year old African American Female

Sam – 22 year old Asian Male

Phillip – 24 year old Native American Indian

One-eyed man – 45 year old raggedy man

Jade - 37 year old woman

Tony – 42 year old Italian male

Trixy – 29 year old rather dull-witted female

Barnabas – 17 year old white male smart beyond his years

Elizabeth – 23 year old Latina

Sarah – 26 year old Asian female

Third - Agree not to kill off or murder any of the above characters. You may introduce characters not on the list and kill them, but all the above have to be alive at the end of the story.

Fourth - Allow your chapter to take place during the summer of 2010.

Fifth - Do not stray from the location – a very large island off the coast of California. You may have your character s leave the island, but they have to be back at the end of the chapter.

Sixth - Try to have your chapter done by the 25th of November. This will give us time to put it together.

Seventh - Just go for it and write!

The novel begins as the above characters are boarding a ferry to take them to the island called Clouds Covering Mounds of Terror from the Chippewa language.

As the month progressed students, faculty, staff, and friends took up their pens and submitted their work. Emails and conversations ensued over the month. Encouragement for those who seemed to waver in their resolve was provided. The following is an example of one of the contributions at just over 1,000 words.

Sam stood staring at the long beach front ahead of him. He knew that the secret that he was hiding was precariously close to being revealed. How was he going to cope with the reality of that darkness within him being uncovered? He sat on the rocky outcrop wondering if there really was anything that he could do. Would any of his life-long friends understand the pain and suffering that he had endured over the years, facing that problem alone?

A seagull flew precariously close and he wondered if there was a way for him to soar into the skies, abandon the island and leave all of his history behind. Could he cut free from all the binding ties that rooted him to this place? Could he fail to turn around and see all that he would leave behind? He dropped his head and moaned, "How did it ever come to this? How can I survive the long years ahead, either here among my friends or without them on a cold barren earth?" Sam felt the breeze upon his back and wondered if he could continue the charade. The seagull dipped low again, its feathers mottled from age and environment. It wound its way against the breeze and with it, sailing further up into the sky and then

lightly dropping down to the water's surface. Sam moved to look closer at the descending bird. He bent his head in the bright sunlight to get a better look at the bird itself, a bird silhouetted against a bright blue western sky. As he focused his look, he realized that the bird had a stunted right leg. It was a disabled creature, yet its pattern of flight did not seem affected. It flew with grace and speed. Only when you looked closely did you notice anything wrong with the bird. Sam watched as the seagull hit the waters of the bay and came out with a wriggling fish. The fish was quickly consumed and the seagull went on with its methodical pursuit of sustenance. On and on the seagull farmed the bay, taking from it all that it needed to survive. Sam also realized that there were no other seagulls in the vicinity. The sky was filled with only the blue of its existence. The stunted seagull moved across the canvass of that sky as a singular inhabitant, a lonely but regal and powerful controller of space and time. It was a while before the bird seemingly had filled its body with enough fish to allow a cessation of the feeding activity. The arching movement across the sky began to slow and it was evident that the bird would come to rest upon the earth. And as Sam watched, the seagull glided toward the beach and with tentative steps landed upon the earth, releasing his bonds to the sky. The footsteps were slow and careful, but also sure and resigned. The bird did not stumble or fall, it produced a cadence that allowed even the stunted limb to support and carry the bird across the sand. Sam continued to watch the progress of the bird as it slowly made its way to what appeared to be its favorite perch, not 25 feet from Sam's location.

The bird made no effort to move away from him, nor show any fright at being in such close proximity to a human. It had eaten its fill and it was now looking forward to a restful time sitting in the warm sun of the bay. Sam thought about the bird, but more was going on than Sam realized. The bird was thinking about Sam. While no words could be exchanged. While no thoughts could be heard by either party, the moment was filled with a silent exchange of mental energy. The seagull settled into the sand and thought about his life as a solitary being. He had been injured at a very early age, his leg almost torn off to remain as a weak appendage that caused both difficulty in his existence and pain in every waking minute. Now resting on the warm sand, the bird could abandon the sense of pain and disabling nature of his injury. The heat from the sand wove around him a soft nest of inhibitors that look away the memories of distress. Life was good and the memories and future thoughts of existence were lost in a blur of heat and satisfaction. The birds eyes slowly closed and dreams of a life in the

air free of the constraints of the earth and a disabling injury vanished as the nutrition of the fish coursed through the bird's body.

Sam could sense in the bird's movements, movements generated by the dreams, that there was an aura emanating from the feathered form. Sam could almost feel his own psyche being touched by that aura. What was it about an old bird and he, a young man who was here on the shoreline verging on making decisions that could impact the rest of his life and others. What made this moment any different than the thousands of other moments that he had experienced on other shores before?

Sam fell back from the moment and crashed into the thoughts he had before the bird had captured his attention. He found himself starting to wallow in the memories of the past, his fears, his desires, and his own inability to face what he himself called a disability. How could he continue the charade? How could he find the strength to continue battling day by day through the myriads of hazards that plagued his passage through time?

The sun was now at its apex and both he and the bird sensed the strength of the waves upon flesh and feather. Sam found that he needed to get away from the sunlight to rest in the shade of the upper beach. At almost the same time, the bird stirred and with rustling feathers started to the return to reality and life with the disabled leg. With a rolling gait, the bird moved down the sand, slowly at first, then picking up speed, faster, faster then into the sky, soon becoming a blur on the blue canvass.

Sam, himself starting to move, thought of the seagull in flight.

This and the rest of the submissions were compiled and submitted to the National Novel Writing Month. The requirement for creating 50,000 words was fulfilled.

The efforts expended in the writing of this novel created by engineers and friends are innovative because it is far from common practice to encourage engineers to write anything but technical material. For those who feel that communication is an absolute necessity for all engineers, providing another avenue for practicing one's communication skills can influence a certain number of students to venture out into new areas of writing that will help their overall writing ability.

Future Considerations

Clearly one of the most important elements of the endeavor to rethink is the planning that goes into the preparation for the November 1 kick off to writing the novel. In the future writing activities, we will carefully gain consensus from

those students, faculty, and staff who wish to participate. Agreements will be made on all the characters involved, the details of possible plot lines, and location details that can be utilized by the writers. The amount of writing that any individual has to do will be kept to the 1,000 words with the continued option to write as much as one likes. Initial meetings with all interested parties will begin during the spring semester before the writing begins. As the fall semester begins, the focused efforts to prepare for the month of writing will take place. In this time period, meetings with all writers will form the list of characters, plot line, and location details. We expect increased interest and a much more professional production in the years to come.

While many of the participants explained that they had a great deal of fun and that the exercise was enjoyable and not as painful as they had thought, anecdotal information is all that is currently available. In the future, surveys will be prepared to gain insights into the acceptance of novel writing activities in the college of engineering. It is hoped that this assessment will show that the writing of novels is a useful activity within an engineering environment.

So, to recap with the words of NaNoWriMo:

What: Writing one 50,000-word novel from scratch in a month's time.

Who: You! We can't do this unless we have some other people trying it as well. Let's write laughably awful yet lengthy prose together.

Why: The reasons are endless! To actively participate in one of our era's most enchanting art forms! To write without having to obsess over quality. To be able to make obscure references to passages from our novels at parties. To be able to mock real novelists who dawdle on and on, taking far longer than 30 days to produce their work.

References

1. National Novel Writing Month
<http://www.nanowrimo.org/>