Writing in the Contemporary Academy

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Abstract

This paper explores the challenges faced by creative practitioners who are also creative writing teachers in the academy. Of particular concern is the way in which traditional research methods are often subverted by the writer's relationship with their world. Interdisciplinarity offers new ways of dealing with these challenges, Cole asserts.

Catherine Cole, 2008
These photographs were taken from a train making its way through the Suffolk countryside: late afternoon, a time for reflection. I’d just spent the day on a quest into places previously unvisited except through someone else’s writing. As a Visiting Writing Fellow at the University of East Anglia, I was following, not in W.G. Sebald’s footsteps exactly, but meandering through places he’d mentioned in The Rings of Saturn. The countryside through which I travelled offered odd, inexplicable poetics. A yacht of the train, a blood red circle suspended over a defoliating landscape. Autumn trees already bare, offered a web in which to ensnare it.

The air was pregnant with questions. Surprise certainly, the creative tensions thrown up by the landscape, the real vying with the imagined. Critical thinking challenged practical executancy. I thought about what I might do with the scene, how I might re-imagine it. Would words suffice or would I use images, music, animation, sound? Would I write it, perform it, draw it – or what combination of all of them might satisfy the deeply felt moment and the intellectual and creative questions it posed? Would the resulting work constitute academic research or creative practice and how might I differentiate between them?

Writing in the academy offers these questions of creative practice. Like my photos of the Suffolk countryside, the role of the writer/academic is an amalgam of theory and critical analysis, research, teaching and industry connections, all of them running together, pulling apart, like a landscape viewed from a distance. As a writer I’m engaged with illusory spaces – those tensions between the fictional and the real, the imagined, and research based on the true versus the felt. I make choices about genre, form, voice, style, affect, my writing segueing through them by necessity as well as imaginative design. These approaches have taken form in the hermeneutics of my crime fiction and my monograph on the theories which underpin the genre, in my Vietnam research into the ways in which colonialism challenges memory, identity and place, in memoir-essays such as my book on AD Hope in which the auto-biographised ‘I’ challenges reader assumptions about biography. I’ve co-edited a book on fashion in fiction and curated a gallery exhibition about the hand-made book. In all of these projects I’ve engaged in a fluid, continuous discourse about what the creative/critical fusions propose to me, and how the diversity of my research and writing background reflects wider institutional questions about the best ways to develop writing pedagogies and interdisciplinary relationships.

The great strength of the discipline of writing, I would argue, rests in questions about the complex relationships between writing, reading, thinking and research and the ways in which these inform the academy’s pedagogical approaches. Some institutions favour theory-centric approaches, others interrogate theory alongside creative work, while others keep practice and theory separate. All offer complex disciplinary semiotics through:

Reading – in how it offers ways to engage with texts, with the world, with ways of seeing, interpreting, translating, reshaping, re-casting the world through which we move.

Writing as text, new media, film, writing ourselves and our relationships with ideas.

Thinking, historically, socially, culturally, visually and performatively about writing as creative practice, its history, its engagements - as individual writers as well as members of a community of writers, about writing theories and how writers engage with or reject them.

Research, creative practice, critique – and their inter-relationships and the way fiction writers fall into an interesting place – not researching a specific area as is the practice of more traditional researchers but in ways which serve a current narrative.

Writing programs offer a unique place in the academy and making the most of this, Maureen Moran suggests, ‘means attending to the distinctiveness of creative writing as an intellectual discipline in its own right. It means protecting it from imposed standards and structures of teaching and research appropriate to other - but different - work in the arts and humanities. It means valuing its contribution to sustaining and enhancing the literary culture of our society, whatever contributions it might make in an adjunct way to critical activities. Above all it means debate - not assumption - about its methods, principles and purposes.’ (Moran:2005:7)
I've worked in a range of writing programs in Australia, and I'm currently at RMIT where the writing program is located in a School of Creative Media where academics in writing, photography, animation, games, and music engage in joint projects and co-curate exhibitions or develop interdisciplinary research. I also work closely with the RMIT School of Applied Communication, which teaches literary studies, and the Design Research Institute, which offers multi-disciplinary collaborations between writers, designers, architects and cartographers. While supporting Moran's call for a strong writing discipline in its own right, I'm also of the view that writing programs work best through interdisciplinary engagements such as these. Such relationships allow teachers and students to continually interrogate the breadth of knowledge required in a work of creative production and how expertise can be acquired across the range. They encourage acknowledgement of the cultural conditions and the various discourses and histories of genre that impinge upon the writing process. How will we teach writing and conduct research, especially in the current academic environment where the Humanities have been under pressure and research funding tightly prescribed, without widely sharing ideas and resources?

“...how can we not engage in a full inter-disciplinary relationship with other practitioners when so much contemporary writing is “written” in new media and multi-modal forms? How also might we recognise the strengths and limitations of our teaching and learning process? What is it we're trying to achieve in our writing program - writing skills, critical rigour, skills for the wider workplace? And how should we measure them?

During last year's observations of writing programs in the UK, I studied UEA's famous program but also that of other British universities, Hull and Manchester University, for example, which offered new thoughts on Writing's future role in the academy and the wider community. When I sat in on UEA's classes I saw long-established approaches with fresh eyes, those tried and true methods of writing workshops certainly and writing's co-relationship with the wider Humanities. A UEA writing class generally has no more than 11 students, a luxurious way of teaching that is rarely found in Australia's writing programs – our small, intense workshops being superseded by large, and as a result, I think, less intensive classes. Or Manchester University's exciting new approaches to the master-class and the summer school; the students' engagement with a famous literary mentor – Martin Amis, for one – and the delights of linking creative writing with literary study tours of Britain – poetry in the Lake District, social realism in the pottery towns. And University of Hull's centre for poetry and poetics - their programs offering students a chance to work with writers of renown who are specialists in these subject areas, and also to engage with a city reshaping itself after economic and cultural shifts – Hull, a port city in which writing and culture offer active ways in which to explore history from William Wilberforce to the downsized industrial.

Questions about where writing in the academy might next turn don't necessarily offer neat answers as to how best to follow on from writing's phenomenal success in the academy. Do the successes of the past require us to think more strategically now? Writing programs, it has widely been asserted, took literary studies and the wider explorations of a shared literary history from the contextual into the individual – and now new media studies have the potential to return them to intensely group-based work, shared technologies, performance, team engagements and exhibition. In response to this, should writing programs rethink the workshop, for example, especially if we are to keep large classes, offering week on, week off smaller group workshops, independent exercises and classes and allow students more time on group-driven activities that allow them to explore a wider range of interdisciplinary approaches?

Writing academics would generally agree that their classes need to continue to explore the ways in which our would-be writers engage with ideas as well as the sensory pervasive, those all-encompassing moments when the senses seem overwhelmed with the “lived” moment of creativity, and is there much to differentiate between these anyway? There's nothing more creative than the exploration of ideas. Moments such as my reflections on the Suffolk train must be intensely lived and thought about...
if they are to emerge as writing. Does our discipline provide this skill or is intense reflection intrinsic – something writing students bring with them when they enrol? And why do students continue to want to study writing anyway? The question seems to have been put but not fully answered. Each year I used to ask it of students in my undergraduate program. For most, I found, it wasn’t the desire to write that once drove me relentlessly – my own degrees offering ‘permission’ of a kind, to give myself over to becoming a writer. For many of this newer generation it’s a curiosity about being creative, or for wanting to write better in other areas of their lives or because writing adds a new dimension in a wider degree.

And then there are the postgraduates for whom a writing program offers an open door through which to undertake an already established project to completion. And the established writers for whom a doctorate of creative arts almost seems unnecessary – those of international fame, prize winning authors who want to write within the academy and get an additional plaudit for their work, not a literary prize but the reward of a doctoral degree. I also suspect it’s the pleasures a university offers that attracts them – the collegial co-joined with the creative community makes a heady mix.

The future of writing as an academic discipline offers all kinds of research potentials, particularly through interdisciplinary approaches. I’m currently developing two ARC projects, both incorporating multi-media but also highly ‘literary’ research approaches. One is a writing, photography and mobile media examination of Vietnam as a site of post-war memory. The other follows Franco Moretti’s approaches to the novel and the city and involves a digitized Atlas of the Australian novel. What are the implications of these research approaches for writing pedagogies, especially if we support Maureen Mann’s belief that writing must be an intellectual discipline in its own right? Writing must surely be a creative conversation with the history of genres. Psychologists such as Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi and Ernst Kris have argued that very creative act is a search for truth. Writers live ‘sensed’ moments which offer the imagination the possibilities of projection – the ways in which a writer ‘re-imagines’ that which they haven’t seen or heard in real life but can see so acutely because they have lived intensely in other ways. Acts of creativity, Kris also has argued, are in themselves a necessary part of artistic creation’. Kris sees creativity as a type of problem-solving behaviour through which emotions are transferred to aesthetic activity. By giving these emotions life or letting them ‘take thought’ they become complex patterns, and, in the case of fiction writing, for example, are narrated and understood.

Others are less certain about this approach. A decade ago the American academic David Radavich, suggested writing programs needed to rethink their over-emphasis on self-expression. He saw those, particularly those in the USA, ‘as developing from a kind of updated version of the 1960s Me Generation’. This is understandable and desirable so far as it goes, he claimed, but writing instructors must take the next step and encourage toward a broad range of people in a rapidly changing world’ (Radavich:2008:online)

I suspect that in any creative writing classroom there are students for whom any or every one of these creative approaches matter. Primary amongst a writing program’s key expectations, I’d suggest, is the aim to provide a range of skills and knowledge that will form the basis of a secure intellectual foundation for ongoing creative production in fiction, non-fiction, critical and multi-disciplinary ways. Through writing programs, universities offer students ideas that engage them in on-going connections with the wider world of ideas – cultural studies, sociology, history, literature, new media, film. We do this because, as Dorritt Cohn has argued, ‘writing is not a mere game, a histrionic, ventriloquist use of serious discourse; it is a highly serious endeavour, having a unique mission – to portray the operation of other minds in their very otherness...’ (Cohn:1978:7) In understanding the world through characters of other’s or our own creation, we also understand ourselves.

Radavic also had views on the ways in which creative writing and the wider academy should meet. Unlike Mann, he suggests that writing classes need to be brought ‘into a deeper and wider relationship with other courses in the curriculum’. In short, he said, ‘if creative writing is to have meaning in the academy of the future, it needs to partake of those very qualities and purposes best representative of true scholarship: namely, broad, informed, intensive reading, thinking, and writing, and a commitment to a social betterment of a troubled world’. (Radavic:2008:online)
Discussions about writing seem, inevitably, to give rise to questions about the ways in which writing challenges time-honoured notions of teaching, research and end of degree skills. A writing program must be committed to fostering an environment where creative production can be nurtured in a sustainable manner. The ways in which we teach creativity and value our teaching’s results – those publications and prizes that are our students’, and our own work – are inextricably connected. Much is made, for example, of UEA’s impressive alumni and their sustained writing careers – Ian McEwan, Kazuo Ishiguro, Tracey Chevaliar, Ann Enright – seeing their publications and prizes as plaudits for the ways in which UEA’s teaching has brought forth the students’ creative potential.

The relationship creative writing teachers share with their students, particularly those already well-regarded writers who enter masters or doctoral programs – offers future unique opportunities for cross-fertilisations of styles and approaches. These relationships have recently begun to colour the debate about the future directions of teaching creativity in the academy, particularly the ways in which we pursue ideas and knowledge, experimentation and production versus our relationship with industry and the wider community, those end products of all our endeavours: publishers, readers, critics. They also, I suggest, offer a far wider scope for research collaborations than writing programs currently acknowledge.

Writing programs, I would argue, supporting Moran’s call for the recognition of writing as a distinctive voice within the academy, also need to be pragmatic. Much is to be gained by ensuring it’s firmly engaged with and participates in, wider university life, not a defensive position but one that argues for and offers the academy new ways of seeing itself.

This approach highlights another debate, one of research and how the critical and the creative work together. A writer’s approach to their own work seems necessarily to immerse itself in the paradoxical - the world offering opportunities for narratives at every turn. The scene from my East Anglian train offered me visual cues, from the local to the universal – from a landscape in which I might place a character on a melancholy evening and the meta-text landscape from which I could draw numerous critical references, not just those of Sebald but also earlier writing about the region – Daniel Defoe’s Travels Through England, or Ronald Blythe’s book, Akenfield, made into a film by Peter Hall, which shook my adolescent notions of place and voice.

Research for production has often been seen as separate from or removing itself from “traditional” university research because when creative practitioners research into historical epochs or themes it is as much anchored in a kind of cherry-picking of the usefully evocative, the Proustian rush back through time as you taste, smell, hear, brush against something that resides in memory. UEA’s Dean, Mark Currie (Currie: 2007: in conversation Cole), believes what is in fact happening in British universities is a true debate about research, particularly the dismantling of boundaries between the critical and the creative. Writers need not feel anxious about being expected to conduct research – they may find more researchers are moving towards them. New historicism, studies in the region – Daniel Defoe’s Travels Through England, or Ronald Blythe’s book, Akenfield, made into a film by Peter Hall, which shook my adolescent notions of place and voice.

The same could be said for writing and its interdisciplinary possibilities – especially how we write for screen or performance, “write” in every connotation of the word, write between genres or forms. The challenge for the academy, it seems, will be the maintenance of this creative/critical fusion. From my train observations I might write an article on Sebald, Defoe or Blythe, a novel, a poem or I might use these photographs in a multimedia exposition or in an academic paper as I am now doing. How can one examine writing in any context without exploring all its creative possibilities in this way?

Writing as a discipline and a pedagogy will build on its successes, developing new projects and ways of working, research, creative practice
and the zones which connect them, engaging with industry and the wider community and encouraging the continual expansion of creative horizons so that there is ongoing capacity for new movements and developments in the arts and social sciences.

In working at a range of universities in Australia, I’ve been involved in a wide range of academic activities that I see as essential to the creative and critical elements of the writing discipline. These include:

- Research activities on writing, literary, cultural and new media studies.
- A dynamic doctoral program with world-renowned writers
- A revised and expanded undergraduate writing degree
- An Honours program in Writing which offers students exciting interdisciplinary projects
- Visiting scholars and writers-in-residence program
- Exchanges with writing programs in Britain, Europe, Asia and the USA
- Enhanced community involvement through continuing education and sponsored industry mentorship programs
- Australian Research Council Discovery and Linkage projects with industry
- A refereed staff and student e-journal and web-based projects
- Writing conferences and special interest forums
- Sponsored events at festivals and literary prizes, schools and community forums.

Through activities such as these, university writing programs offer conversations with literary, cultural and media studies, and create exciting links across schools and faculties. As such, writing can lead the debate about the importance of a rich cultural heritage, engagement with the Australian and international community, economic and social benefits, national identity and infrastructure. Writing extends creative networks of people interested in ideas. For example, memory and place have long been a strong influence in my writing. My research in Vietnam and in memory studies has led to books that are a mix of the fictional, the poetic and critical. Seeing the ways in which writers approach writing in Vietnam was a revelation to me. We know so little of one another’s work and finding out more offers interesting interconnections and exchanges but also possibilities to discuss the meaning of translation and intent, voice and method which may have far reaching implications for how we write and teach. We might also encourage production across the many languages used in Australia including Aboriginal languages. What is our role in nurturing future as well as current creative developments and what partnerships would these offer? How will these engagements offer students new ways of participating in the university?

Erica McWilliam, who led the Creative Workforce Program, ARC Centre of Excellence for Creative Industries and Innovation and is an Associate Fellow with the Carrick Institute, said in 2007: ‘All our graduates, as potential future creatives, will be performing work that is less focused on routine problem-solving and more focused on forging new social relationships, undertaking novel challenges and synthesising big-picture scenarios. They will be working at unprecedented speed in very different workplace cultures: less vertical, more flexible and more team-based. For these, creativity cannot be left to languish on the margins of university learning and teaching, relegated to a disciplinary corner. It has become everyone’s business.’ (McWilliam: 2007: conference paper)

Despite the economic downturn and its impact on education, writing programs will continue to offer students classes that help them to achieve their creative potential. We’ve certainly moved beyond the old chestnuts about whether writing can be taught. For me, this means writing as an academic discipline needs to have the capacity to adapt to change and...
consider fundamental alterations in direction if needed: no single answer is necessarily right but there may be advantages in one approach over another. We need a continual process of review - analysis of international trends, input from colleagues and students and the capacity to give clear intellectual leadership within an organic and flexible structure in which writing is widely defined, rigorous and innovative and engaged with all areas of the university.

About the Author

Catherine Cole is Professor of Creative Writing at RMIT University in Melbourne, Australia. She has published three novels, *Dry Dock, Skin Deep, The Grave at Thu Le* and the non-fiction works *Private Dicks and Feisty Chicks: An Interrogation of Crime Fiction* and *The Poet Who Forgot*. She has also published poetry, short stories, essays and book reviews. She has co-edited two non-fiction works *Fashion in Fiction: Clothing in fiction, television and film* and *Dien Bien Phu*. Her research activities include critical and theoretical studies of literature as well as research for creative publications. *Writing Vietnam: An anthology of contemporary writing about Vietnam* will be published in late 2009. Cole is a project coordinator and journal editor for *The Australian Literary Compendium*, a co-project with ABC Radio National which develops web-based resources on Australian Literature for schools and universities in Australia and internationally. The project supports essays and refereed papers from Australian literary scholars and conducts conferences and community activities as well as tertiary studies in Australian Writing. As a former member of the committee of management and the executive of the Australian Society of Authors, Cole has extensive links with Australian writers, publishers and critics. She is a member of the Board of the Eleanor Dark Foundation, has judged literary awards and examined theses in the fields of Australian writers and writing. The DVD *Writers on Writing* for which she was the Executive Producer, is used in writing programs in Australian and internationally, and was nominated for an Atom Award in 2006.

References


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