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The Other Writing Group: an embodied workshop

Abstract:

New insights and approaches to creative activity grounded in embodiment have the potential to enhance creative writing practices by focusing on the embodied dimensions of writing, such as undertaking whole organism warm-ups, and attending to the material set-up of a workshop. This article presents findings from a pilot research project called The Other Writing Group that offered a structure for writers to explore embodied strategies in a community of peers. The structure employed by the group owes its origins to dance researcher Nancy Stark Smith's Underscore, a collaborative creative model for practising and researching improvisation. It is argued that embodied and social approaches to writing, more usually associated with performing arts, can critique notions of the writer as virtuoso and innovator, and instead present repetition and habit as significant in a fuller account of productive practice. Feedback and reflections from participants in the group suggest that approaches to practice which emphasise social and embodied dimensions can enhance individual creative writing practice.

Biographical note:

Dr Vahri McKenzie is a Senior Lecturer in the School of Arts and Humanities at Edith Cowan University, where her work encompasses teaching, researching, and making new artwork. Her work as a scholar focuses on creative arts practices that show how artists contribute to new knowledge. Vahri has a deep curiosity about creativity and the way it works across disciplinary boundaries, which has led to artistic research with an emphasis on collaboration and multidisciplinarity. Recent projects include *Narrowcast* (Bunbury Regional Art Galleries, 2019), a durational performance artwork exploring the practice of improvised speech, and a new version of Euripides' tragedy *Bakkhai* (2018), co-commissioned by Bunbury Regional Entertainment Centre and Culture and the Arts (WA). Her short fiction has been published by MidnightSun (SA), Hunter Writers Centre (NSW), *Gargouille* (VIC), and Margaret River Press (WA).

Introduction

New insights and approaches to creative activity that are grounded in embodiment have the potential to enhance creative writing practices by focusing on the embodied dimensions of writing. A pilot research project called The Other Writing Group offered a structure for writers to explore embodied strategies in a community of peers that owes its origins to dance researcher Nancy Stark Smith's Underscore, a collaborative creative model for practising and researching improvisation. This work builds on earlier projects that explored approaches to adapting Smith's Underscore for creative artists working in disciplines outside the performing arts (McKenzie 2014), where the iteration of the research addressed in this paper questioned how writers in particular might benefit from the structure. The phases of The Other Writing Group – meeting, warm-up, triggers for writing activity, an 'open score', and reflection – are described, and I present my analysis of participating writers' responses to the workshop in the form of reflective statements. Findings are discussed in a structure that responds to Antonia Pont's (2017) four 'criteria of practising' – form, relaxation, repetition, innovation – in order to illuminate the potential for embodied and material understandings of those criteria, revealing some common ground between performance studies and creative writing studies that can enhance creative practices.

The cleaving of voice and writing

The paper begins with a literature review that briefly traces the idea of voice in literary and writing theory, the separation of oral and literate cultures, and the implications for teaching and learning writing today. 'Voice' is a much used but little understood analytical term in creative writing theory. In teaching writing and reading literature, it is a handy way of acknowledging that we receive a sense of a speaker behind the written text. 'Voice' is a key term appearing in Australia's English Secondary Curriculum that guides the teaching of text creation and analysis, in a context in which the crafting of creative texts now appears as an explicit topic of teaching and learning.[1] However, if you look up 'voice' in a literary dictionary such as Cuddon et al., you will be redirected to terms such as 'narrator', 'persona', and 'viewpoint' (2012: 764), and Abrams and Harpham explore the term alongside 'persona' and 'tone' (2015: 286). Yet to many readers and writers, 'voice' effectively suggests two ideas: the written literary text is readily experienced as a spoken utterance; and that utterance implies a specific speaker, 'a pervasive authorial presence … who has invented, ordered and rendered all these literary characters and materials in just this way' (Ibid: 288). This approach to voice effectively connects practice to theory, but does not account for the material experience of the bodies that participate in this communicative act. For that it is useful to look at Abrams and Harpham's comments on Aristotle's *Rhetoric* (2018) and *Poetics* (1997).

Rhetoric is concerned with the practical applications of language, in particular the persuasive potential of an oration in order to win a listener over to the speaker's point of view. This might be contrasted with *Poetics*, in which poetry (and all literature was poetry in this context) sought to imitate, that is, to represent in fictional form the thoughts, feelings and interactions of humans. Such a distinction makes more sense in an ancient culture in which writing was a new technology; however, we might usefully

recall *Rhetoric* for its ability to draw our attention to the *act of communication* between author and reader, and the writer's knowing deployment of rhetorical strategies in order to engage and guide the reader's imaginative and emotional responses. By cross-referencing terms as Abrams and Harpham do, the idea of voice 'has come to signify the equivalent in imaginative literature to Aristotle's "ethos" in a speech of persuasive rhetoric' and reflects a 'concern with the importance of the physical voice in an oration' (Ibid.: 287-8). Yet, though it referred to oral speaking, to become a comprehensive subject of study – 'a body of sequentially organized, scientific principles which explained and abetted what verbal persuasion consisted in' (Ong 2002: 108) – rhetoric was a product of writing.

A historical perspective is important in order to understand how the embodied voice became severed from the page voice, and is well illustrated by the uptake of writing amongst the traditional lineage of Classical period philosophers Socrates, Plato and Aristotle. Socrates wrote nothing down, but rather, thought and taught in dialogue; Plato recreated Socrates' dialogues in writing, and developed the written dialogue as a form of enquiry; Aristotle is chiefly known for his written texts, including *Rhetoric* and *Poetics*, which offer important foundations for modern theories of writing. The 150-year span separating these thinkers within the ancient Greek Classical period offers a frame for illustrating the way that writing was starting to eclipse orality. Since Eric Havelock's ground-breaking *Preface to Plato* (1963), it is conventional to consider the invention of the Greek alphabet, which adapted the Phoenician alphabet around 800 BCE, as the technology that made such a change possible. Whereas the Phoenician alphabet only had signs for consonants, the ancient Greek alphabet revolutionised writing by breaking each spoken sound into its component parts: consonants and vowels (Powell 2002: 120; Ong 2002: 28). Writing artificially breaks speech into discrete units, abstracting us from the embodied world in which the sound of speech is experienced as a flowing wave (Powell 2002: 123).

Walter Ong built on Havelock's work to create a field of studies in orality, developing our understandings of the sharp distinction between oral and literate cultures. In the absence of writing, oral cultures required strategies to preserve knowledge, such as recitation, repetition and condensed wisdom: 'Homeric Greeks valued clichés because not only the poets but the entire oral noetic world or thought world relied upon the formulaic constitution of thought' (Ong 2002: 28). Pre-alphabetic composition of epic poetry depended on a traditional stock of memorised formulas in hexametric clusters, which enabled a poet to extemporize correct metrical lines, so long as the materials were traditional; this dictated to a large extent the form and content of poetry (Ibid. 58). The introduction of the technology of writing, whilst laborious to learn, enabled new strategies to preserve cultural material that led to 'more original, more abstract thought' (Ibid.: 28). The impacts on human society of this act of abstraction that separated speech from writing were momentous, with obvious gains and less obvious losses.

The use of writing made the word, rather than the phrase, the unit of composition, and allowed more time to reflect upon the work before sharing it (Carson 2009: 43). In poet and classicist Anne Carson's analysis, the focus required to learn to read and write led to a shutting off of the sensory body and other non-visual senses in order to develop self-control: 'Literate training encourages a heightened awareness of personal

boundaries as the vessel of one's self. To control the boundaries is to possess oneself' (Ibid. 44). Carson argues that this is why Archaic lyric poets such as Sappho described the experience of love, a sensual phenomenon, as an assault or invasion of the body, or as a kind of lack. Others go further; philosopher David Abram argues that while the Greek alphabet enabled the abstraction of ephemeral qualities due to alphabetic literacy's profoundly reflexive sense of self, at the same time it 'effectively severed all ties between the written letters and the sensible world from which they were derived' (1997: 111). This perspective is supported by Ong's list of cultural characteristics of orally based thought and expression, which includes knowledge that closely references the human lifeworld (Ong 2002: 42), is empathetic and participatory rather than objectively distanced (Ibid.: 45), and is situational rather than abstract (Ibid.: 49). Alphabetic innovation permits precision and efficiency but comes at the cost of more contextually situated and relational thought. New creative insights and practices grounded in embodiment have the potential to reclaim some of our lost sensual selves, whose loss, in the view of Abram, has contributed to our alienation from others in our more-than-human world. The pilot research project known to participants as The Other Writing Group applies a performance-based creative process to a writing workshop, offering embodied strategies that seek to reclaim some of the productive habits of orally based thought in a writing practice.

The Other Writing Group

The Other Writing Group (TOWG) was a new iteration of ongoing research regarding the forms and processes of creativity from an arts-practice perspective. It owes its origins to dance researcher Nancy Stark Smith's Underscore, a collaborative creative model for practising and researching improvisation, principally for performing artists of the contemporary dance form known as contact improvisation (Koteen & Smith 2008). The Underscore draws attention to 'changing states' through a sustained period of creative endeavour (Ibid.: 90). By naming the experience of every stage of a creative process, the Underscore can act as a map to guide progress through an immersive creative activity. Whilst not prescribing the activity or process, the model provides structure for a personal and group practice in a way that fosters creative collaboration with others simultaneously engaged. Adapted and applied to TOWG, this article presents my research and the workshop series as an example of writing practice that is social and embodied in order to argue that: 1) such approaches can enhance an individual creative writing practice, and 2) relaxation and repetition are important strategies in a productive writing practice.

When 'the body' appears in written text in the company of 'writing' it generally indicates embodied experience as *subject matter*: 'in/visible bodies, glamorous bodies, engineered bodies, trafficked bodies, dismembered bodies, persecuted bodies', as a 2019 *Storytelling and the body* conference suggests[2]. Embodiment as an approach to *practice* offers a different perspective that reminds us of the body's mediating position between mind and activity, as well as between individual activity and the social world. Practice theorists 'conceive of practices as embodied, materially mediated arrays of human activity centrally organized around shared practical understanding';

furthermore, 'the forms of human activity are entwined with the character of the human body' (Schatzki 2001: 11). These perspectives align with the characteristics of oral cultures noted above (Ong 2002), in which knowledge is situated and relational. Furthermore, 'Not only do practical understandings, ways of proceeding, and even setups of the material environment represent forms of knowledge – propositional knowledge presupposes and depends on them' (Schatzki 2001: 21). While accounts of embodied practice may be supplemented with propositional knowledge, they are fundamentally holistic in the prominence given to the whole organism, the matter that employs the tools that mark the page.

Over a three-year period (2013-2015), I explored approaches to adapting Smith's Underscore for creative artists working in disciplines outside the performing arts. I sought to identify those aspects of the model that were common to creative practice across a number of domains, and tested these in a series of workshops with emerging artists, community members and key professional collaborators co-located in the south west of Western Australia. Three key findings emerged from earlier iterations of the ongoing research that led to TOWG, illustrating that participation in a creative practice that attends to somatic awareness, improvisation and collaboration can be beneficial for creative artists regardless of their domain of practice. Moreover, an experience of creative flow can manifest in the context of everyday movements like walking, and movement does not need to be virtuosic for the encounter with embodiment to take place. Finally, the focus on perception and sensation as a way of preparing for and undertaking creative activity is one that participants can apply in creative practices outside workshops (McKenzie 2014).

In earlier phases of the research, participants have included writers; the phase reported in this paper focused explicitly on writers. TOWG offered writers a workshop series that encouraged playfulness accompanied by focused attention, within an egalitarian culture. The process supports attention to doing and sensing, with an awareness of social dynamics, by considering the physical and material set-up of the workshop, and undertaking a walking warm-up and a period of mindful relaxation in a group context. Importantly, talking is positioned specifically at the beginning and end of the practice only, so that propositional knowledge – explicit expression of facts, concepts and theories – is pushed to the sides, and practical knowledge takes precedence (Schatzki 2001: 21). Three-hour practices were conducted monthly from November 2015 to December 2016 (with gaps during holiday periods). Twenty-two people consented to participate in the project, of whom eleven became regular participants. 'Regular participants' are those who offered one or more reflections and participated to the end of the series. Of the other eleven participants, five offered no reflection; four attended a single time and reflected on their participation; and two offered reflections and then explicitly withdrew: these perspectives are considered below.

Methodologically, I situate myself as both artist-as-researcher and researcher-as-artist (Finley 2011: 435) within the milieu of that which I research, where I was workshop host, participating writer, and researcher. My research is also socially and physically situated in my roles as community member, artist and scholar based in the South West of Western Australia, and makes no claim to be objective, neutral or value-free (Stanley & Wise 2002: 163). Thus, when inviting TOWG workshop participants to write

reflective statements at any time about any aspect of the practice, I too participated in reflective writing. Twenty-nine reflections were gathered (including my own, though these are not presented as evidence), and qualitatively analysed for common themes. Three significant ideas emerged from this analysis, where significance is indicated through being mentioned numerous times across the data set. Firstly, more than half of the submitted reflections referenced the physical situation of the workshop, including the studio space and the environment and/or weather, which was clearly visible and audible from within the writing studio. Secondly, more than two-thirds of the reflections referred to the workshop process; this broad theme is further discussed in terms of particular elements of the process that were reflected upon, such as warm-ups, the timing of the process, and triggers for writing. Thirdly, more than one third of reflections considered the social nature of the workshop, where responses divided between positive, ambivalent, and negative attitudes; the results suggest a need for further research.

Forms for practice

The focus of TOWG was to *practise creatively* together, with the production of creative works being a secondary concern. This was explicit in the name and description of the workshop, where it was 'other' to more production-oriented writing groups. The workshop series built a shared creative practice with a number of phases or states, summarised as meeting to convey the form; a warm-up to encourage relaxation; repetition of components of the form; an open score to invite innovation; and a meeting to reflect on the practice. In 'Practising poetry: thinking form, emulation and formal invention', Antonia Pont discusses artistic practice as 'doubly difficult' in that it demands the invention of its products via existing behavioural forms, such as emulation, and additionally 'welcomes innovation at the level *of its own form*' (2017: 1, emphasis in original). To tease out these entangled aspects of practice, Pont proposes four 'criteria of practising': form, repetition, relaxation, and 'the final criterion', described as 'repeating repetition', where innovation at the level of form may occur (Ibid.: 12). Similarly, TOWG offers a framework for practising writing that accommodates existing behavioural forms as well as making space for innovations in practice. Whilst Pont's criteria are not necessarily stages in a creative practice, the framework offers a useful position from which to discuss the phases of TOWG (which need not be sequential) and so to work towards a fuller account of practice by addressing some social and embodied dimensions.

Form, for Pont, is '*that-which-is-repeatable*' (Ibid. 14, emphasis in original), and as such, the repeated structure of TOWG is a form. Each workshop began with a meeting to identify the phases of the practice to come, to ask questions, and to make verbal contributions (talking and discussion do not occur after this phase until the end of the practice). In TOWG the meeting itself is part of the form, occurring in every practice in much the same way, usually seated on the floor in a circle. Its regularity contributes to the development of a shared language that allows participants to become familiar with the practice through the naming of phases and spaces. Devising a shared language is a key factor identified by Mamykina, Candy and Edmonds' study of successful

collaboration in interdisciplinary teams, noting that such language need not be verbal (2002: 98). Extending this insight, and building on those of practice theorists (Schatzki 2001), TOWG showed that the shared embodied know-how of a writing practice occurs prior to any explicit propositional knowledge of creative writing; at the very least, by offering a form that pauses other activities and creates a space and time to write.

An example of embodied know-how is offered in relation to the use – or not – of chairs. Unlike a conventional writing workshop, this one was held in a 'studio' that was also an indoor basketball court with lots of natural light, facing onto a courtyard with grass and trees. As is common when practising and researching improvisation, the studio was free of tables and chairs. Initially this set-up was maintained, both to encourage embodied engagement in warm-ups and to support an egalitarian culture in an otherwise hierarchical context. (TOWG took place on a university campus and was approved by the university's Human Research Ethics Committee; it also asked participants to engage in open and personal ways that may be unfamiliar in the context of research projects and educational institutions.) However, while some participants were comfortable getting onto and up from the floor, others required chairs, so part way into the series, beanbags – more mobile and less rigid than tables and chairs – were added to the studio space. As mentioned above, more than half of participants' reflections considered the physical situation of the workshop and conditions outside of the studio as worthy of reflection, where comments were almost evenly divided between positive attitudes, negative attitudes, and those that noted the set-up as 'interesting' or 'different'[3]. As reflections are dated, it is clear that almost all of those that offered what I characterise as negative responses to the workshop space date from workshops prior to the addition of beanbags and the suggestion that participants brought with them any additional equipment they required for comfort. The studio afforded options for sitting but there were no tables or chairs, and no spatial orientation suggesting 'teacher' and 'learner' roles, with students in rows facing a teacher at the 'front'. This defamiliarisation engaged participants' attention with sensations arising in relation to the physical environment and others within that environment, encouraging them to adapt in relation to the material environment.

The phases of TOWG have physical and time-based dimensions, and both are discussed explicitly during the meeting such that all participants are aware of, and contribute to, a collective agreement about how long to practise, and the physical perimeter of the practice space. Establishing time and space parameters, while somewhat arbitrary, provides a framework that supports creative risk-taking in the open score phase of the workshop (to be discussed below). The repeated form of the practice that begins with meeting, and the repeated form of that meeting, supports participants' embodied and social understanding of creative writing practice that does not require written instruction, and may indeed be more powerful for this reason.

Relaxation

Explicit attention to embodied experience is fundamental to the form of practice explored here, and may well expand our understanding of relaxation that Pont deems one of the four criteria of practice. At the end of the meeting phase participants begin,

in their own time, a self-guided walk within the vicinity of the space, followed by a period of mindful relaxation. Much has been written on the particular value of walking for thinking, and Rebecca Solnit's *Wanderlust* remains a powerful 'amateur history' of this 'amateur act' (2000: 4). In addition to the egalitarian tones of that phrase, implying that for most of us no specialist skill is required to walk, Solnit points to walking's significance in many areas of social and creative enquiry; I suggest that this is another way of noting the significance of embodiment in many areas of social and creative enquiry. *Wanderlust* makes a persuasive case for walking's relation to thinking: 'The rhythm of walking generates a kind of rhythm of thinking' (Ibid.: 5), and the focus on rhythm permits Solnit to note that it is the acts of the body itself in motion, not travel or sights per se, that 'make things happen in the mind' (Ibid.: 6). Solnit's insight is supported by a recent experimental study which found that walking itself encourages creativity, even if the walking occurs on a treadmill (Oppezzo & Schwartz 2014).

TOWG's participant reflections support these findings. Whilst reflections could address any aspect of the practice, one quarter mentioned the warm-ups, using positive terms such as 'loved' and 'enjoyed'; one wrote that this phase 'freed up [her] mind'. Another participant goes further, describing it as 'important' and noting the quality of focused attention brought to her experiences:

> I found the warm up at the beginning of the session to be an important stage for me. It allowed me to fill my head with 'where am I walking, how am I walking, who is walking by me, who is reaching out to me?' As all these thoughts filled my head, other thoughts of the outside world left.

In their own time, participants transition from walking into self-guided mindful relaxation, with no intention other than to seek comfort. For some this was found in walking; in our production-oriented culture, Solnit notes, doing nothing is 'best done by disguising it as doing something, and the something closest to doing nothing is walking' (2000: 5). Reflecting the idea that it is acts of the body itself that support creative thought (Solnit 2000; Oppezzo & Schwartz 2014), relaxation in TOWG is framed in physical terms. Mindful relaxation is an iterative process of actively seeking comfort by resting in a supported position such as sitting, lying, or leaning against walls, reflecting on the sensations within, and moving into a more comfortable position. Regular participants learned to use the relaxation phase to shed 'emotions … brought in from outside' and prepare themselves for creative engagement:

> The negative emotions I felt were often emotions that I brought in from outside the group. In each workshop I attended I found that this negativity dissipated by the end of the class, aided by the walk and the relaxing.

As I noted above, the phases of the practice need not be sequential, and returning to relaxation from any point is encouraged as a path to reengagement. TOWG's relaxation phase offers a clear way for participants to engage with an embodied approach to writing, with mindful relaxation helping to structure one's attention to immediate experience in order to prepare for the sustained and focused attention of the open score.

Repetition

Pont writes that repetition 'will mark both: the set of behaviours more generally … and also the components of the form itself' (2017: 8). Similarly, repetition in TOWG occurs through regular practise, and through repeating components within that form, where the first repetition supports the second. 'Repetition' may also encompass pattern recognition and a sense of rhythm. In Smith's Underscore, a phase known as 'grazing' recognises the way connections arise, develop, and end, and this is followed by repetition of any preceding phase, or further connections (Koteen & Smith 2008: 93). 'Grazing' also usefully describes this phase of TOWG in which participants dip into and out of a number of connections with the space, the people, and any other trigger for activity. One quarter of reflections mentioned timing, using words like 'flow' and 'momentum'; whilst perceptions of time varied, where 'time flew', or a participant 'liked the "slow" ending', participants framed them positively.

Initially I set up a series of triggers for writing activities, including familiar prompts from conventional writing workshops. More than a quarter of reflections referred to these, all in positive terms. As the workshop series progressed, the group sustained its own triggers for activity, and a few artefacts were held over from one practice to 'seed' the next. Certain types of activities (both those suggested by me and those that arose organically) appeared better able to elicit interactivity through repetition and transformation in the workshops. For example, there was a tendency to focus on 'concrete' concerns in which the form and materials of the artefact are significant, and writing engaged the whole body. A key finding from earlier iterations of my research reveals that participants engaging in unstructured creative activity will not limit themselves to their familiar techniques of practice but engage with whatever is at hand (McKenzie 2014). This was borne out in TOWG, such that paper provided for writing was also drawn on, cut up and folded (see Figures 1 and 2). Such creative strategies draw attention to the materially mediated, embodied nature of writing practice. Written forms that supported engagement included lists and short line poems with space on both sides (for adding to or tearing up; see Figures 3 and 4).

Figure 1 (above): written work included cuts and folds as well as text.

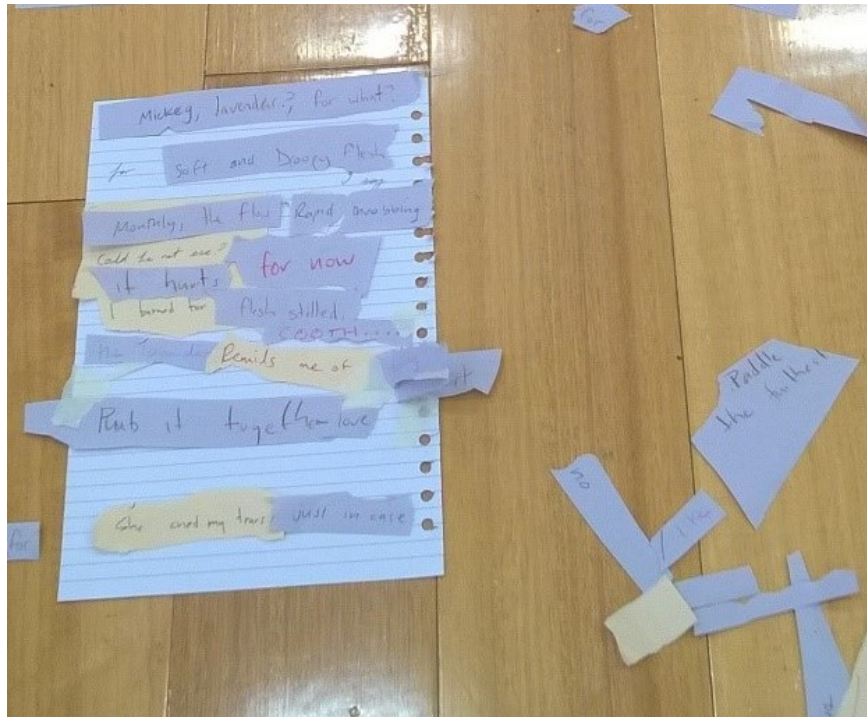Figure 2 (above): materials were engaged with in a variety of ways.

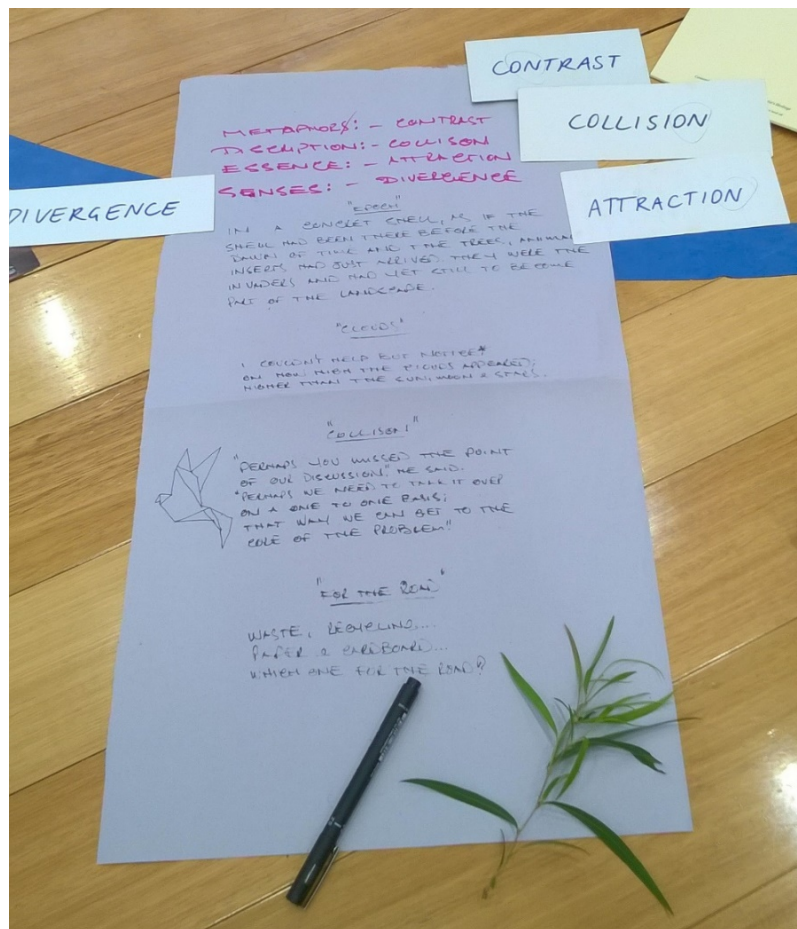Figure 3 (above): poems created from short phrases that were physically transformed.

Figure 4 (above): writing was generated from lists of words.

Specific processes, characters, themes, and fragments reappeared throughout the workshop series, inviting emulation and transformation. One participant reflected: 'One of the most exciting times for me in the workshop was when someone would add to my narrative, furthering the story-line or adding new characters.' This 'theme and variations' approach to practise is quite different from a list of instructions that implies authority and linearity, and might, rather, be compared to an oral culture's working and reworking of given materials. However, whilst Ong and others have pointed to the formulaic nature of epic poetry created in this way (2002: 28), TOWG encouraged participants to practice unselfconsciously while repeating actions – their own, and those they observed in the group – as a way to support useful creative habits. Imitation – another mode of repetition – is explicitly encouraged in TOWG, which challenged some participants' attitudes towards the norms of creative practice. One participant listed twelve aspects of her creative practice that were re-evaluated in the light of TOWG, including: 'I have found it is OK to … Try things out and discard quickly if I don't like something … Not produce a finished something … Look at other's work and copy – I soon wander off on my own tangent.' These comments reflect the lasting impact of an 'anxiety of influence' that still negatively impacts creative writers who may fear their work is weak if it does not triumph over the influence of its predecessors (Bloom 1997). We might fruitfully learn from the more cooperative perspectives of other theorists and artistic practices, such as Elizabeth Prettejohn on modern painting, who promotes 'generous imitation': not only does this support understanding one's predecessors, it may best illustrate what is new by clearly aligning with work that is past, in that common themes illuminate their individual variations (2017).

Pont notes that 'Practising is that mode of doing which unfolds in parallel to habit (since it involves structured behaviours and repetition of those behaviours) but without coinciding with it' (2017: 4). To practise, a certain amount of continuity is required, so that 'When we practise, we accompany habit for a distance and then go beyond it (or *beside* it)' (Ibid.: 5, emphasis in original); and 'We go, then, *via* habit on the way *to* practice' (Ibid.: 7, emphasis in original). I have selected these comments of Pont's to illustrate the significance of embodied understandings, here expressed as locations and directions that orient a practice. In much the same way, Nigel Krauth expands the notion of the 'domains' of creative practice into the tangible real world, such that 'The fiction writer exists in an ecosystem of mind, body and world' (2006: 187). The specific activities in TOWG did not need to bear any relation to performance studies for embodied practice that engages the whole organism to occur. Rather it is the situated and relational nature of the practice – the studio setting, the inclusion of the whole organism in writing activities, the collaborative structure – that models and condones useful writing habits, which supports innovation in creative writing.

Repeating repetition

Pont's final criterion of practice, after form, repetition and relaxation, is described as 'repeating repetition', and it is here that innovation within practice might occur. This fourth criterion remains rather opaque in Pont's article, perhaps because the moment of

innovation is itself not well understood. At the same time, Pont points directly at the question-begging use of:

> terms like 'inspiration' or 'muse' [that] may well also be a shorthand for some very tangible sets of behaviours and habitudes that poets or artists have distilled into (sometimes) productive personal mythologies that cross-fertilise with long-standing cultural beliefs and imaginaries. If encountering the 'muse' involves regular walks in the bush, it would seem to me that the form[ula] {regular walking + consistent location} has to be included in what feeds and enables inspiration. (2017: 14)

Such a formula, or form, was an important aspect of TOWG, and this paper articulates some productive 'behaviours and habitudes' as techniques that structure effective creative practice, even as this leaves room for the as-yet-unknown. 'Repeating repetition' may be illuminated via analogy with Smith's Underscore, which was developed as a form that sits *underneath* whatever practice focus an artist brings to it, where in its central phase, the open score, 'Forms arise, develop, end, transition, and continue in a constant flux' (Koteen & Smith 2008: 95). That is, both the 'open score' and 'repeating repetition' are approaches to practise that fluidly build upon prior approaches in order to afford opportunities for innovation, just as the heart of TOWG is an open score in which participants are invited to do what they will with their writing practice: to initiate works and to respond to the works of others. Grazing naturally flows into the open score, so that, in their own time, participants become more deeply engrossed in an activity, often building on work initiated by someone else.

TOWG was explicitly an 'other' sort of writing workshop and differed from workshops devoted to the review of quality literary work in a supportive environment. A second norm of creative practice that was revealed through participant reflections is the abiding concern with producing complete work, or work that is completely one's own. It is clear from the 'Repetition' section above that work was produced in TOWG, but the nature of this work was not complete nor solely authored. More than two-thirds of reflections commented on the workshop process; a small number of these can be characterised as negative responses to the process, and a similar number of reflections evaluated TOWG as insufficiently product-oriented. Participants 'felt the need to "produce"', or felt an opportunity was lost 'for people to share a piece of their recent writing'. The two participants mentioned above who attended a number of workshops, reflected on their experiences, and then withdrew, are represented here. Perhaps our teaching and learning of writing can benefit from a more explicit connection to practise so that innovation is more clearly built upon the foundations of repetition and habit.

Attentive practice transforms creative habits, and effects can overflow into other areas; Pont writes that practitioners 'may cease certain intractable behaviours that have burdened them. They may solve … entrenched problems in other parts of their lives' (2017: 3). One quarter of TOWG's reflections reported flow-on effects outside the workshop, where some noted aspects of the practice they now employ at home, and others identified particular ideas they continued to work on at home. One TOWG participant wrote that as a 'direct result of TOWG which encourages walking around and interacting,'

> … I now do a little 'warm up' before sitting down to write, just for a minute. … When I do this, I seem much more focused … I also attempt to write for shorter periods of time and have had better results with my writing.

Another reported solving a sewing problem in a new way:

> … in my post 'grazing' mood, I just took the task out and 'did something' just like we were grazing around the various activities, not having to get anything perfect and not having to complete anything. I found I solved the sewing problem in a way I had never thought about before and the fix was simple and worked beautifully.

She added, 'I now regularly solve problems in different ways' that are 'quite a different and relaxed process from my usual doggedness.' As a workshop practice, TOWG endeavours to nurture sustainable behaviours and creative processes that can be applied outside the workshop, and outside the writing domain. In her study of poets' creative processes, Jane Piirto gathers perspectives from professional writers and notes their frequent recourse to language that is readily dismissed by experimental research psychologists as 'mystical'. Whilst an experience of creative work 'just coming' is not unfamiliar, it remains under-analysed, and Piirto suggests: 'Perhaps experimental psychologists would do well to pay a little more attention to these accounts rather than to dismiss them as "mystical" and therefore not scientific' (2005: 16). The close attention I bring to reflections shared in TOWG aims to draw out and articulate the techniques that supported productive writing habits and creative problem-solving.

Conclusion

Just as TOWG challenges the notion that writing is a disembodied activity, its social dimensions challenge traditional perspectives of writing that position it as an individual and isolated activity. Just over a third of reflections considered the social nature of the workshop, with responses evenly divided between attitudes I characterise as positive or negative. Positive expressions referred to 'mutual understanding' and feeling 'validated'; negative expressions identified themselves as 'introverted' or fearful of judgement; a small number of ambivalent responses noted that others 'had problems' participating but claimed they had none themselves. Nonetheless, regular participants are represented amongst those with negative reflections on the social elements of the practice (where regular participants are those who submitted one or more reflections and participated to the end of the series). The results suggest a need for further research, where questions arise regarding the extent to which a psychological disposition may be operating, and how process-oriented workshops might address or mitigate this. Part of the project's success was sustained by the community of practice it developed. Characteristics defining this community's practice include playfulness, inclusive participation, and a common goal of working through recognised phases in the same physical space. As a research methodology, the study of a creative practice can be enhanced by taking a holistic view that is able to address 'individual and situation, organism and environment' (Sawyer 2003: 21), where the 'best scientific explanation of creativity might be hybrid, incorporating properties of both individuals and groups' (Sawyer 2010: 366). This social science perspective might be compared with the phenomenon of social groups like 'Shut up & write', which recognise that writing has

both individual and social dimensions.[4] Both need to be addressed in a sustainable creative practice.

The Other Writing Group contributed to and supported the creative practices of participants, and so benefited writers in their own practices by using a workshop model that focused on the embodied dimensions of writing in a community of peers. Some changed their writing practice as a result of their experiences. The common ground between performance studies and creative writing studies can be found in a creative practice that accounts for the whole organism. The embodied aspects explored here support attention to doing and sensing by considering the physical and material set-up of the workshop (where knowledgeable participants adapted the space and its affordances), and undertaking whole organism preparations through walking and a period of mindful relaxation. Such considerations expand upon the four criteria of practice that Pont identifies by revealing their embodied and material dimensions, and so offer fuller accounts of practice. A writing practice may be particularly susceptible to theories that devalue embodied understandings of ourselves and the world, given the cultural dominance of textual communication, and the abstract nature of the writing process. The research reported in this paper counters such susceptibility, offering a theoretical approach to writing practice that engages the body socially, physically, methodologically and creatively.

Endnotes

1. This version of the curriculum dates from 2016. A pop-up dialogue box offers this circular description: 'voice can be used to refer to the nature of the voice projected in a text by an author', Australian Curriculum 'Senior secondary curriculum: English' at
https://www.australiancurriculum.edu.au/senior-secondary-curriculum/english/english/?unit=Unit+2
(accessed 3 March 2019).

2. Progressive Connexions 2019 'Storytelling and the body: an inclusive interdisciplinary project' at http://www.progressiveconnexions.net/interdisciplinary-projects/storytelling/storytelling-and-the-body/conferences/ (accessed 23 September 2019).

3. This and all other uncited comments are quoted from participant reflections gathered in the course of The Other Writing Group research project.

4. 'Shut up & write' is a trade-marked organisation that 'hosts free weekly events nation-wide where you can get your writing done, alongside other writers in your local community', http://www.shutupwrite.com/about/ (accessed 3 March 2019).

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Figures

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