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TEXT as textbook: an academic journal in its community

Abstract:

This article uses the case of *TEXT* to examine the possibility that an online academic peer-reviewed journal might operate as a textbook. Following Lave and Wenger (1991), Wenger (2006), Horsley, Knight and Huntly (2010) and others, it considers concepts of communities of practice, examines the role *TEXT* has taken in its community, analyses *TEXT* editorial practices and compares it with the practice of textbook editors, and compares elements of textbook production and usage with *TEXT*'s profile. Finally, the article looks briefly at the migration of textbooks from paper to smart applications and how this relates to *TEXT* as textbook.

Biographical note:

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Keywords:

Creative writing – *TEXT* journal – Academic journal – Textbook – Community of practice

Introduction

In the 1996 discussions between Tess Brady and myself, which led to the establishment of the open access online journal *TEXT: Journal of Writing and Writing Courses*, we focused on the idea of a journal 'to support the newly proposed association' – the Australian Association of Writing Programs (AAWP) – and agreed that 'a new association needed a journal to promote and broadcast its doings' (Krauth 2011). The 'doings' of the AAWP were, of course, teaching and research.

> Tess and I also traded possible titles for the nascent journal … We decided on 'TEXT'. It seemed to capture all that was happening at the time: it was postmodern, digital and traditional too. It wasn't folksy, craft or cottage industry oriented, like so much discourse about creative arts practice at the time. It seemed to us a title that lay within the ambit of the creative writer, but also had an academic ring to it (Krauth 2011).

I do not recall that the idea of *TEXT* as textbook *per se* occurred to us in 1996, but certainly there was the concept that *TEXT* would be 'the hub' of the expanding creative writing discipline in Australia. We envisaged that it would provide the focal point for a community of scholars and students, that it would draw together and disseminate ideas about writing and the teaching/learning of writing, and become an accumulating repository of relevant information, and that the discussions it created and developed, in national and international contexts, would have significant implications and applications for building the discipline.

This article uses the case of *TEXT* to examine the possibility that an online academic peer-reviewed journal might operate as a textbook. Following Lave and Wenger (1991), Wenger (2006), Horsley, Knight and Huntly (2010) and others, it considers concepts of communities of practice, examines the role *TEXT* has taken in its community, analyses *TEXT* editorial practices and compares it with the practice of textbook editors, and compares elements of textbook production and usage with *TEXT*'s profile. Finally, the article looks briefly at the migration of textbooks from paper to smart applications and how this relates to *TEXT* as a textbook.

TEXT and a community of practice

According to Etienne Wenger, 'communities of practice are formed by people who engage in a process of collective learning in a shared domain of human endeavor'. This process develops 'a set of stories and cases that … become a shared repertoire for [the community's] practice' (Wenger 2006). *TEXT*, as a forum where AAWP members, and other interested parties, have created and shared knowledge, has been a site of investigation, problem solving, reflection, mapping and record.

> A growing number of associations, professional and otherwise, are seeking ways to focus on learning through reflection on practice … The peer-to-peer learning activities typical of communities of practice offer a complementary alternative to more traditional course offerings and publications (Wenger 2006).

The idea of a community of practice derives from the concept of 'situated learning' where professional learning takes place in social situations, such as workplaces (Lave & Wenger 1991). The community of practice is typically a group of active, expert professionals who seek to gain and further knowledge in their area and who develop mechanisms for sharing experience and information. The mechanisms the group devises to manage their knowledge depend on the type of communication and networks they set up:

> in case after case, it becomes clear that knowledge work involves communication among loosely structured networks and communities of people, and that understanding it involves identifying the social practices and relationships that are operative in a particular context … Lave and Wenger show how new workers come to master a body of knowledge through a sort of apprenticeship or "legitimate peripheral participation" in the activities of a group of experienced workers (Thomas, Kellogg & Erickson 2001).

TEXT and its relationship to the AAWP, to scholars, practitioners and early career researchers, and to such individuals beyond the association, provides a good example of a community of practice, especially so in the situation where: the rapidly expanding discipline had very limited traditional research output pre-1997, had a growing number of staff being employed from other disciplines and from the creative industries, and had a newly-burgeoning research culture. In a real sense, in the late 1990s, creative writing scholars were all 'apprentices' to a new (and itself changing) research practice.

Wenger's theory stresses the importance of face-to-face contact between community members – in *TEXT*'s case, this function was provided formally by the AAWP's annual conference and other activities – but Wenger also points out:

> New technologies such as the Internet have extended the reach of our interactions beyond the geographical limitations of traditional communities … The concept of community of practice … has now become the foundation of a perspective on knowing and learning that informs efforts to create learning systems in various sectors and at various levels of scale, from local communities, to single organizations, partnerships, cities, regions, and the entire world (2006).

A key factor has been the development of online communities of practice. The advantages and disadvantages of virtual spaces as they relate to online communities in university and education contexts have been studied by several researchers (including Mann & Talandis 2012, Riverin & Stacey 2008). Conclusions indicate how the internet enhances collaborative opportunities, is motivating, and improves the group's sense of identity. At the same time, an unwelcoming or inflexible tone on a website can have negative effects, and information overload can be a problem. The editors of *TEXT* are familiar with these situations, and have done their best to maintain an environment which, as Mann and Talandis put it, aims to 'balance the cognitive and social needs of the community with the needs of individual members' (Mann & Talandis 2012). While *TEXT* has not involved discussion boards, newsgroups or blogs, it did initially support a system of notes and letters that was an attempt to create a dynamic interactive discourse among

AAWP members and others. This was phased out not for want of traffic, or for loss of belief in the value of the idea, but because it had made the site too labour intensive for the editors. In any case, by the mid-2000s, strongly interactive social and academic networks were developing through other activities of the AAWP and Australian Postgraduate Writers Network (APWN) activities. These included newsletters, symposia, workshops and various face-to-face and online meetings and other activities.

TEXT as a textbook

Part of the rationale for *TEXT* being considered a textbook lies in the role it has taken within its community. Horsley, Knight and Huntly identify three features in the relationship of textbooks to their communities of practice. 'Such learning tools,' they say: 1) 'reflect an academic disciplinary community of practice … [and ultimately reflect] the shared teaching and learning resources within the academic community'; 2) 'embody a community of practice discourse that reflects the shared understandings of a disciplinary (academic) community'; and 3) 'align with a disciplinary pedagogic discourse that reflects the history and development of the discipline (in the context of content development in University teaching and learning)' (Horsley, Knight & Huntly 2010). In both its production and its usage, *TEXT* has operated in ways correlating with these features.

TEXT *as a shared teaching and learning resource*

TEXT was, from the start, aimed at the needs of scholars in furthering their research discourse, but it soon established itself as a learning tool. A way to illustrate this is by looking at how *TEXT* took up the contentious subject of the exegesis.

The first article to raise the topic of the exegesis was Gaylene Perry's 'Writing in the dark: exorcising the exegesis', published in the fourth issue of *TEXT* in October 1998. Perry was then a PhD student wrestling with the requirement 'to couple a creative piece with a critical exegesis' (Perry 1998). Perhaps not noticed greatly at the time was the fact that Antonina Lewis's piece, 'Andy Warhol ate my baby' (Lewis 1998), published alongside Perry's work, was itself part of an honours exegesis which subtly demonstrated how creative and how valuable could be the writing produced in an exegetical situation. These articles introduced the notion of students in the community of practice writing about their problems and/or proposed solutions, and sharing their work with others.

In the contexts of the so-called Strand Report (1998) into research in the creative arts and the increasing enrolments of creative writing research students, the exegesis as a topic of debate gained momentum. This culminated in *TEXT*'s first fully academic Special Issue in 2004 – *Illuminating the Exegesis*, edited by Julie Fletcher and Allan Mann. It featured eight academic articles clearly focused on explaining and demystifying the exegesis. It also included a mapping of the debate which had already occurred in the pages of *TEXT* (compiled by the *TEXT* editors) and which referenced 30 articles in the five years

previous (see 'Exegesis – the debate in TEXT' 2004). The special issue was specifically developed by its editors as a learning tool. It responded to problems plaguing honours and research students at the time; it provided a learning resource for students – and for supervisors too; and it drew into focus the debate which *TEXT* had been hosting.

As an example of *TEXT*'s influence as a teaching and learning resource, I mention the fact that, while reading the *TEXT* special issue on the exegesis, I pondered why postgraduate students still had difficulty with the concept of the exegesis even after the years of debate we had been through. I wondered if this was because the concept was not being introduced early enough in their studies. While writing an exegesis component as assessment item into a third year course outline for the first time at Griffith in 2004, it occurred to me: *Why start familiarity with the exegesis only one year before the Honours year? Why not introduce students to the exegesis as soon as they begin studying creative writing?* Ever since, we have had a first year lecture on the exegesis and a week of workshops devoted to it. We treat it as a genre of writing. From then on, all our creative writing assessment items need to be accompanied by an exegesis (typically a 1000-word short story is partnered with a 500-word exegesis). Advanced undergraduate years require greater sophistication in the matter and argument included in the exegesis. Our students are perfectly familiar with the demands of, and rationale for, the exegesis by the time they enter Honours. Equally, they have no trouble recognizing the ERA concept of creative writing as research because they realise the research statement is an exegesis. It was by interacting with *TEXT* as a learning tool that I developed this key aspect of curriculum at Griffith.

The *Illuminating the Exegesis* special issue can be seen to illustrate the thinking behind *TEXT* – that it makes available for its discipline a central site for the nexus between research and learning. I recommend *TEXT* to my honours and PhD students as essential reading for understanding their enrolment in a creative writing research degree. I also recommend articles to third-year undergraduates and mention the journal in lectures even to first years. And I am aware that other lecturers recommend *TEXT*. The following testimonials appeared in *TEXT* last year:

> it is an invaluable source for reading current theory and practice in the discipline of Creative Writing (Gail Pittaway, Lecturer, Waikato Institute of Technology);
>
> Without *TEXT*, the practice, research, and pedagogy of creative writing at the university level would be in dire straits (Kurt Heinzelman, Professor of Poetry and Poetics, University of Texas at Austin); and,
>
> My students and I use *TEXT* constantly as a resource (Jeri Kroll, Professor and Dean of Graduate Research, Flinders University) (cited in Brophy & Krauth 2012)

A key feature of the definition of a textbook is that students have access to it. In the pre-online era, this often meant textbooks were items students purchased to have alongside them on their desks. From the beginning, *TEXT* had the opportunity to be used as a textbook by students, or their teachers who were also often eagerly engaged in learning

about their practices, because it was freely available online. Users can even read it on the bus now, on smart devices. Over the years, several publishers have tried to lure *TEXT* to situate itself and its contents behind a pay-wall, but its editors have strongly resisted this. Maintaining free access to this resource, especially for those relatively resource-poor in our midst (i.e. students and early career researchers) has driven this major editorial policy. *TEXT*'s overarching policy has always been one too of the academic gift economy – of engaging the voluntary labour of many (authors, reviewers, indexers, editors and others) for the benefit of all.

TEXT *embodying a community of practice discourse*

From its first editorial, *TEXT* was keen to embody and be a repository for its discipline's discourse:

> There are exciting developments in creative writing on the web and in multimedia, and we expect TEXT will be a forum for critique and information in these emerging fields … The reading of literature (i.e. text reception, the traditional business of English Departments) has full status; but the making of literature (i.e. text production, the business of new Creative Arts and Writing Departments) has yet to establish its niche in spite of swelling student numbers and increased research activity. Being the first refereed journal in the creative writing area in Australia, TEXT represents a further step towards [the Creative Writing discipline] claiming full recognition. … TEXT invites submissions of an academic, creative, critical review or occasional nature for its further issues (Brady & Krauth 1997).

The way *TEXT* interpreted and nuanced the discourse can be traced by reading its 17 years of editorials in sequence. In deciding on topics for the editorial each issue, the editors asked each other: *What's going on at the moment? What are the key concerns?* Being alert to the shape of the discourse at any one time also affected the way pieces for publication were sought and encouraged. This awareness of staying up-to-date with the discipline discourse correlates with how textbook editors treat both proposals for new volumes as well as each revision of their publication to reflect the discipline's advances.

To show how *TEXT* set up and reflected discourse, I will use one strand as an example. From the beginning, a key agenda item for *TEXT* editors was to promote understanding of the international context in which Australian tertiary institutions taught creative writing. After the first AAWP conference (at the University of Technology, Sydney in 1996) where John Barth was keynote speaker, I particularly wanted Professor Barth to contribute to *TEXT*. Clearly I failed in my advances to him and in other advances we made to overseas scholars. *TEXT* and the Australian creative writing disciplinary endeavour were small ponds in the first couple of years, I suppose, and not so attractive to such big fish. But in 1999, co-editor Tess Brady landed a big one. Tess invited Lance Olsen (then at the University of Idaho) to contribute on the basis of his book *Rebel Yell* (1998). We were excited about his textbook and its introduction of a new set of radical concepts into the teaching of creative writing at tertiary level. Olsen responded with a

delightful article about rock'n'roll and writing: it was exactly the kind of piece that expanded the Australian discourse into new dimensions. In the same issue we asked Inez Baranay to review the book, thus tying Australian teaching understanding to the new directions his article was taking.

An increasing number of contributions followed which allowed *TEXT* readers to access international discourses about creative writing. Canadian, American, Australasian and British writer/academics have now published in text, significantly enriching both Australian scholars' view of teaching and research, and also placing the Australian discourse at the forefront of international thinking. *TEXT* makes claim now to being the leading creative writing research journal. As Heinzelman said:

> I know of no other journal in this [the northern] hemisphere that does what *TEXT* does. So, your journal is indispensable, quite literally… Without *TEXT*, the practice, research, and pedagogy of creative writing at the university level would be in dire straits (cited in Brophy & Krauth 2012).

Proactive solicitation of submissions from overseas 'superstars' was matched by positive encouragement of submissions from early career researchers locally. Knowing that *TEXT*'s relevance to the disciplinary sub-discourse of doctoral and honours students is key to the journal being used as a textbook, the editors have always encouraged submissions from emerging and developing researchers. Sometimes these have come in for refereeing in a very raw state, and editors have worked with authors to improve the articles before sending them for peer review. In this way, *TEXT* has shared a teaching function with a textbook, but with the added benefit of interactivity inserted in the process. In this, *TEXT* has recognized that its users include the next generation of teachers and researchers, that it must adapt to ensure that it always speaks a language accessible to new and old participants in the discipline alike, and that it constantly reacts to the perceived needs of its community.

TEXT *as a discourse that reflects the history and development of the discipline*

It is clear that *TEXT* aligns with 'a disciplinary pedagogic discourse that reflects the history and development of [its] discipline' (Horsley, Knight & Huntly 2010) in Australian universities. The editorials in sequence indicate a history of issues that unfolded for the tertiary creative writing community:

> 1997 – the need for creative writing's recognition in the research community and the withdrawal of the 'J' category (creative works) from research quantum (RQ) weightings;
>
> 1998 – the national mapping of creative writing courses and the significance for creative writing of the RQ debate over creative research;
>
> 1999 – the Australia Research Council's (ARC) requirement that the creative arts reorient themselves in terms of the research they do, and the need for the AAWP to be seen as, and to have the voice of, the national peak body for creative writing, equivalent to those in visual arts, theatre and music areas;

2000 – establishment of the *TEXT* Special Issues series alongside an attempt to create a National Writing Research Board (all part of the emphasis on the ARC's agenda), and promotion of international contexts and connections;

2001 – issues in teaching creative writing, including new methods and new community venues nationally and internationally, and the recognition that *TEXT* as a research journal had become a 'hot property' and was subject to a number of takeover bids;

2002 – *TEXT*'s international reach, the maturing of the discourse and academic debate in *TEXT*, and its pioneering research agenda;

2003 – international dialogues regarding teaching creative writing, and the AAWP as representative at national and international levels;

2004 – questions of the rigour of the exegesis and other debates around it, and how many academic journals the creative writing discipline needed;

2005 – issues related to peer review in academic journals, and creative writing under the government's new Research Quality Framework (RQF);

2006 – the politics and ethics of writing and research, and the quality of academic writing in submissions to *TEXT*, along with the editors' role;

2007 – the issue of creative writing courses being blamed for the state of writing in the nation, and the nature of newspaper literary reviewing;

2008 – issues affecting writer-academics, and those issues addressed with a historical focus going back to Matthew Arnold;

2009 – *TEXT* announced as an A-ranked journal under Excellence in Research for Australia (ERA), and the issue of creative writing doctoral submissions under ERA;

2010 – intersections of writing and the body, and the growing influence of *TEXT*'s international outreach;

2011 – the state of writing, and research into writing, in Australia;

2012 – *TEXT*'s international outreach, and the question of the first writing course in Australia.

Evident in this chronology is the changing status of creative writing from minor teaching area in some Australian universities, to major player on the tertiary education stage. The AAWP now speaks alongside other creative arts peak bodies at the national level and, indeed, has taken a leading role in agendas related to research and teaching issues. It is also recognized internationally (the Director of NAWE, the UK counterpart to AAWP, sits on the AAWP committee) and, particularly through *TEXT*, Australian research is widely cited internationally.

In many instances, in the early years, the editorials called for mobilization, to which the AAWP community responded magnificently. The voice used in the editorials was regularly egalitarian, seeking to engage the community as a plain-speaking, democratic group of individuals who needed to work together to achieve the goals of national and international recognition which, ultimately, they have done.

The articles and special issues also perform the function of mapping a history of the discipline in Australia: just as Perry's article started a long-term (and still current) thread

of discourse about the exegesis, so too Paul Dawson's 'Writing programmes in Australian universities: creative art or literary research?' (1999) began a debate about creativity and research in creative writing which had wide-reaching effect, and Brien and Krauth's Special Issue 1 introduced the genre of creative nonfiction into a national discourse where it is now firmly established. As another example, if you enter 'Practice + research' into the search mechanism on the front page of *TEXT*, you will get more than 400 results, indicating a rich discourse focused on how the territory of practice-led research / practice as research has developed for creative writing. In 2002, Tess Brady noted how *TEXT* operated to monitor and reflect the discipline's developments:

> Our concerns have been various but certain topics, possibly those of the more pressing kind, have appeared again and again. There has been, over the years, considerable debate about the idea of research in the creative arts and in writing in particular, about the nature of the exegesis and the emergence of research training in the field. Debates as to the relationship between practice and theory – and which kind of theory – have occurred with a tentative nodding of the head to praxis, as yet, and comfortably, undefined. There have been discussions on assessment and the particular issues of assessing a piece of creative writing. Similarly issues relating to pedagogy have been aired. The issue of the dual career of writer and teacher of writing have received attention along with papers on how new writers develop and form their career paths and how the more experienced survive. The teaching of writing in new technology environments, and other specific contexts, have been focussed on. This current issue is no exception. Its topics include: the relationship of literary studies to creative writing; investigation of alternative assessment online and in audio form; and analysis of mentorship from various perspectives (Brady & Krauth 2002).

Great textbooks not only provide a record of developing understandings about their discipline, they can set the agenda for ways in which the discipline discourse might expand and become more relevant to its community and their changing circumstances (see, for example, Olsen's *Rebel Yell*, mentioned above). *TEXT* editorials have at times been purposefully provocative, and so too the selection of articles for publication. In the latter case, *TEXT* has relied on a large cohort of peer reviewers – covering the entire community of practice – who are, happily, in touch with, and helping to set, the discipline's innovative agenda.

Although there are many, one example of a ground breaking submission which sets a new agenda is Shane Smith's 'Academaesthetics: how the essay and comic can save each other' (2007). This brilliant honours submission (from the University of Canberra) is a research article in comic book form. It traces discourses related to the essay and the comic, which are key to major current debates about research and creativity. In its genre-merging, it is hyper-aware of developments in the creative writing discipline. Because of *TEXT*'s flexible delivery mode, and the innovative thinking which has characterised its community from the start, the journal was able to publish this inventive research piece and make it available to students world wide.

Thus, in a range of significant ways, *TEXT* fulfils the criteria Horsley, Knight and Huntly (2010) have identified regarding how a textbook relates to its community of practice.

Developments in textbook production

From my perspective – as a teacher who has used print textbooks and as an academic who has contributed to them, but as someone who has not written or edited them – I perceive that the nature of the paper-based textbook is changing. It seems that the textbook is less the work of one expert interpreting a discipline, and more a collection of expert views from various sections of that discipline. Thus there are textbooks today that are compiled by teams of writers, illustrators, designers and others, while other volumes have chapters contributed by different authors. This growing focus on collaboration in capturing the diversity of a learning area is undoubtedly related to the fine-graining of information going on across all disciplines, and a growing respect for a multiplicity of narratives – the many stories a discipline tells, and the differing ways these can be read and received. In this context, the idea of a journal as a textbook becomes less radical: if a textbook can be a selection of expert views on a discipline's discourse, then the selective use of an online journal contributed to by experts can perform a similar role.

The traditional textbook has always allowed for the teacher's interpretative usage – to give emphasis and elaboration here, to skip bits there, to add their own knowledge and expertise to that in the text – according to the teacher's individual understanding of the subject and their awareness of best learning and teaching practice. In this case, the textbook provides a reference from which a teaching practice develops: it inspires, nourishes and supports a good teacher. *TEXT* fulfils these requirements. A good teacher can make selections from it. It is a flexible, authentic, reputable and accessible set of readings in a discipline area. A teacher's informed knowledge of *TEXT* can provide an excellent set of readings for cohorts especially at senior undergraduate, honours and postgraduate levels. As students do not necessarily know how to read and use a textbook to its full extent (see Krusty624 et al 2013), *TEXT* can similarly seem like an enormously complex resource these days. But with sympathetic direction, a teacher or supervisor can guide students to rich veins of reading in *TEXT* to inform and support their research, just as teachers can guide students through the often complex compendium of resources (or 'educational resources') which comprise many textbooks.

With textbooks beginning to move onto iPads and other smart platforms, and the future of scholarship becoming, gradually, more digital (see Ayers 2013, Graydon et al 2011, 'iBooks textbooks for iPads' 2013), the future shape of the textbook looks more like *TEXT* than ever before. Ayers recently investigated the rate of change from 'the monographic culture' to digital publication, and found that 'digital scholarship has already demonstrated a powerful capacity that print scholarship seldom even attempts: the ability to reach a very large and diverse audience', describing how:

> new digital networks have adapted themselves to print culture more than the other way around, with some of the most important digital innovations amplifying and strengthening traditional monographic scholarship. JSTOR and Google Books, for example, make the vast work of prior generations available to a digital audience. Digital publication – such as the online version of this article – permits authors to link to sources, authorities, and related work in helpful and convenient ways without changing a work's format on paper (Ayers 2013).

The migration of textbooks from paper to smart applications is fraught, for publishers, with perils that relate to their inflated incomes from textbooks and their handling of copyright. By contrast, *TEXT* is a 'textbook' that cuts out the middle-man (the book publisher). It is written by academics, scholars and students *for* academics, scholars and students; its costs are covered by university academics' service (with minimal monetary considerations along the way), and it lands on its users' desktops ready to use.

Conclusion, and thoughts for the future

Although it does not look like a traditional textbook, *TEXT* has in many ways operated as such in both its relationship with its community of practice and in being a learning tool for students and their teachers. With the possibility that textbooks will 'go digital' in the next decade, *TEXT* looks more and more like a textbook of the future. As *TEXT*'s archive of general and special issues grows, there is perhaps an imperative to think in this way and order and organise the materials with such use in mind.

A report of a recent study at Indiana State University indicates how digital textbooks rate against print text books:

> College students who study with digital textbooks perform just as well on tests as do their peers who use print textbooks… The biggest 'pro' of digital texts is convenience, whether it's using a laptop, notebook or phone… Another 'pro' is professors like digital texts because they can provide more current material than print textbooks, which can take a year or two to get to print (Mann 2013).

The biggest negative mentioned by the 233 students in the study was eyestrain from reading small screens. The Indiana State study also indicates the growing international interest in the digital textbook and its significant flexibility in terms of delivery and currency. In this context, it is not hard to imagine how there might be a number of *TEXT textbooks of creative writing* – a series of versions of the journal that are available at the same URL,but which select and group articles of current and historical interest for students at various levels and works specifically as a teaching and learning tool.

There is real potential here. The big question is, how will we organise the material, and how much will we charge for access to it?

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