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Proteus as writer: the role of the (academic) writing class in preparing Australian graduates for careers in the creative arts

Abstract:

For academic leaders in the creative arts in Australia, recent publications inspire and inform ongoing consideration of how best to prepare students in practice-led disciplines for professional life beyond the academy. In 2010, the Australia Council for the Arts reported on its most recent survey of the careers of professional artists in Australia and, in 2011, the Australian Learning & Teaching Council published threshold learning outcomes for students in practice-led disciplines in the creative arts. Both point to the need for graduates to have skills that enable a confident transition between the academy and the creative industries, and that strengthen graduates' prospects for continuing employability in fields in which the protean career is common. These skills are practice-based and specialist, and generic. Of the generic skills, written communication is typically demanded at university as 'academic writing'. Such writing can, however, be restrictively perceived as being formulaic and of limited relevance to professional life beyond the academy. This paper advocates the teaching of academic writing to students in the creative arts, but in such ways that transcend narrow generic definition in order to develop in students both technical competence in formal, written communication and an awareness of principles of academic writing that are relevant to professional writing more broadly, within the context of the protean career. In doing so, the paper focuses on academic leadership as represented by those who design curricula for, and teach students in, practice-led disciplines in the creative arts. While this iteration of leadership may be less visible than others, it nevertheless can be formative and transformative for students as future protean careerists.

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Introduction

In recent decades, studies on the need for, and nature of, leadership in Australian higher education (Ramsden 1998; Scott, Coates & Anderson 2008) typically cite the many constraints and challenges faced by universities during times of change. These include increased student numbers and decreased government funding, and concomitant questions around the student experience, including how best to equip students for professional life beyond the university. The deregulation of Australian higher education from 2012, and government plans to increase the number of graduates, are particular challenges for the future.

Additionally, those who lead the establishment of 'new' disciplines, such as in the creative arts, must work towards achieving recognition of what they do, whether at institutional, discipline, sectoral or professional levels, and establishing standards to that end. This translates into leadership in various forms. *TEXT*, for example, has contributed much to the establishment of writing as a discipline in Australian higher education and, in recent years, the creative arts more broadly, especially through themed special issues on such matters as supervision in the creative arts and practice-led research. The Australasian Association of Writing Programs and its members have also advanced the discipline, including through participation in the Australian Learning and Teaching Council's drafting of the *Creative & performing arts: learning and teaching academic standards statement* (2010). These are contributory and collaborative iterations of leadership that do not fit traditional, hierarchical leadership models with senior management at the helm. At local levels within institutions, such leadership can also be manifest in the work of those who design curricula and teach (Law & Glover 2000: 37-38).

Thus viewed, academic leadership is a '*process* of engaging people in change, leading them forwards, achieving voluntary followership, helping identify what most needs to be done and then helping make it happen' (Scott, Coates & Anderson 2008: 2). This is one of three conceptualisations of leadership most common among leaders in Australian higher education, the other two being based on 'qualities or capabilities' and 'a particular group of people' (Scott, Coates & Anderson 2008: 2). With its emphasis on those being led, rather than leader, a process-oriented view of leadership may be less visible than others, but because of that, such a view raises questions about who is led and towards what goal. In response to those questions, this paper offers one perspective on the creative arts. It considers the ways in which academic leaders, as curriculum designers and teachers, can prepare creative arts students for professional life. It does so by focussing on written communication as a core competence for the protean careerist.

The creative arts graduate: Proteus or pauper?

The ancient Greeks believed that the sea god Proteus could reshape himself. Proteus appears in Homer's *Odyssey*, where '[h]e became in turn a bearded lion, a snake, a panther, a monstrous boar; then running water, then a towering and leafy tree...' (1980: 45). Today, the word 'protean' denotes variability and, in the case of

practitioners in the creative arts, versatility. Bennett observes that '[t]he traditional, linear career model has little relevance to the cultural sector, wherein people self-manage their careers in what have been described as protean careers' (2007: 135). Such careers, which are also described as 'boundaryless' or 'portfolio', are associated with the value placed by the careerist on satisfaction in a chosen field, and represent a shift in focus from continuing employment to continuing employability, something with which practitioners in the creative arts traditionally have been familiar (Bridgstock 2005).

Notions of self-management and variety, and the residual image of the robust and resourceful Proteus rising from the sea, may be a heady mix for those aspiring to careers in the creative arts. The reality, however, may be more sobering in the mundane sense of 'making a living'. Since 1983, the Australia Council for the Arts has periodically reported the results of national surveys of professional artists, with 'artists' encompassing a range of practitioners including those in the visual arts, writing, crafts, acting, dance and music, and associated occupations. Telling are primary titles chosen for reports on the surveys, which include *When are you going to get a real job?* (Throsby & Mills 1989), *But what do you do for a living?* (Throsby & Thompson 1994), *Don't give up your day job* (Throsby & Hollister 2003) and *Do you really expect to get paid?* (Throsby & Zednik 2010). The most recent report illustrates the typical protean career. It differentiates between creative work, arts-related work and non-arts work. In 2007-2008, Australian artists spent approximately half of their working time on creative practice, with the other half divided between arts-related and non-arts activities. Over one third of artists had at some time applied their creative specialisation to work outside of the arts, including in public service, not-for-profit and community- or welfare-based organisations (Throsby & Zednik 2010: 8-10). While working in 'non-creative' industries may be pragmatically motivated, it also may result in productive alliances as Haseman points out, citing examples that include '[p]erformance artists [who] shape innovative corporate training programs ... and interactive web designers [who] work with city councils to create the virtual heritage of their community', which represent 'a new relationship between aesthetics and industry' (Haseman 2005: 174). Viewed positively, the protean career becomes 'a supportive ideology' (Zeitz, Blau & Fertig 2009: 372) for those who work beyond one organisation.

Such scenarios will be familiar to those who teach and design curricula within the creative arts in Australian universities, especially those for whom teaching itself has been a protean career move. For undergraduate students, contact with these teachers and engagement with programs of study may represent an extended and formative insight into the professional world that they hope to enter. At the level of unit of study, this may occur in various ways, vicarious or otherwise; at the level of program of study, it may occur through the inculcation of types of knowledge and skill. Learning for those in the creative arts is practice-based and specialised, and it is also more generalised, in the form of a 'wide range of knowledge and competencies', even though the two can overlap (Throsby & Zednik 2010: 26).

That graduates in protean careers need metacompetencies with trans-occupational application is well established, but less well investigated are the ways in which these graduates in the creative arts navigate and manage their careers (Bridgstock 2005). Throsby and Zednik (2010) identify specific factors that artists in Australia consider to be most influential in advancing their careers, three of which are intrinsic (hard work, persistence; passion, self-motivation; talent) and three of which are extrinsic (support, encouragement; critical timing; training). They note that '[o]verwhelmingly it is the intrinsic factors that dominate—artists primarily look to their own inner resources as the main motivation of their artistic work, rather than relying on external factors' (Throsby & Zednik 2010: 32). Training, one of the extrinsic factors, was the least influential of the named factors. Given that artistic practice seldom represents the entirety of artists' work, and that sixty-five percent of artists in Australia are educated to tertiary level, well above the average of twenty-five percent for the workforce overall (Throsby & Zednik 2010: 7), these findings are thought provoking for those academic leaders whose contributions are represented by the 'training' category.

What, then, is the contribution university education makes, or can make, to the metacompetencies required by these protean careerists? Bennett (2009) has made progress towards answering that question in dance, which has the smallest number of practising artists in Australia, and in which a practice-based career tends to be brief. Bennett found that dance artists are conscious not only of the protean nature of their careers but also 'a number of critical areas for skills development including marketing and self-promotion, small business management, and grant writing' (2009: 31), which will not necessarily be covered by formal education. Furthermore, artists propose changes to three aspects of pre-professional training: 'career awareness and development (37%), training in different genres (37%), and ... course structure (26%)' (Bennett 2009: 32). While acknowledging that the complexity of dance artists' potential professional needs precludes exhaustive skills development through pre-professional education, Bennett does argue that 'there is an obligation to make students aware of the real world of work. Alongside "selling the dream," pre-professional education should open the door to the myriad opportunities within and beyond the cultural industries' (2009: 33). No doubt those who design curricula and teach are sensitive to their potential to 'open the door', but the ways in which this can occur are many. A good starting point is to consider written communication skills, given that a large body of research in recent decades (see Beaufort 2008) has shown the pervasiveness, diversity and importance of writing in the workplace.

Written communication is also a good starting point because of its prominence in undergraduate-level programs in Australian universities generally and its relevance to undergraduate students in the creative arts specifically. In 2010, the Australian Learning & Teaching Council (ALTC) published an academic standards statement that sets threshold learning outcome statements for bachelor and master degree students in practice-led disciplines in the creative arts. The learning outcomes, which were informed by extensive consultation including with employers and professional bodies, were intended to 'capture what it means to practise as a professional in the Creative and Performing Arts', by articulating minimum levels of knowledge, skills

and capabilities. By implication, the standards statement acknowledges the protean nature of careers in the creative arts by stating that graduates may move across areas within or outside the creative arts (Holmes 2011: 13). The fourth of the six learning outcomes for the bachelor-level student concerns written communication skills; students must be able to ‘interpret, communicate and present ideas, problems and arguments in modes suited to a range of audiences’ (Holmes 2011: 16). Acknowledged as a ‘relatively complex’ learning outcome, this covers communication involved in practice-led specialisations but also ‘a student’s capacity to articulate ideas in the more conventional discourses of higher education such as written and spoken presentations’ (Holmes 2011: 16). Because the ALTC expects universities to build on threshold learning outcomes to suit their own institutional imperatives, it is timely to revisit the ways in which undergraduate students learn to write for academic purposes, and the ways in which curriculum and pedagogy can become active sites for the symbiosis between that learning and later employment.

Preparing Proteus

Students who enter university can be seen to enter discourse communities or communities of practice, designations that have been used in scholarship on academic writing (Paltridge 2004: 89). These communities are delineated in part by discipline nomenclature, which encourages students to identify themselves as inhabitants of distinctive and named territories (Williamson 2010) and, by implication, certain discursive practices that arise from common interests and modes of enquiry. The pedagogical value of the discourse community as a concept has, however, been challenged because of the contestable implications of stability and hegemony, and because of claims that such communities are not necessarily grounded in ‘real social situations’ (Devitt, Bawarshi & Reiff 2003: 541). As a broad concept, the discourse community does, nevertheless, serve well those teachers who reflect on what discursive standards and norms they present to students.

Discourse communities potentially are alien territory for students, to greater or lesser extents, and may be particularly so for those students who have gained entry to university on bases other than completion of secondary school, such as creative or professional practice. Becher, who describes academic disciplines as ‘tribes’ and ‘territories’, posits that ‘the professional language and literature of a disciplinary group play a key role in establishing its cultural identity’, which may be overt in disciplines that employ specialist terminology but less so in disciplines in the arts and humanities, which still may have certain linguistic norms and conventions (1989: 24), or dialects. Perceptions of academic territory as discursively distinctive are familiar to teachers of writing who, like Thomas, have observed students who take a formulaic and jargonistic approach to writing ‘in the quest to sound academic and therefore correct’ (Thomas 2004). They may see themselves as ‘bad writers’ rather than as learners negotiating one of the many challenges they will face as communicators within and beyond the university (Fernsten & Reda 2011). These students appear to believe that ‘[d]estined to dazzle rather than to enlighten, the academic livery of the

word fulfils the eminent function of keeping the pupil at a distance' (Bourdieu & Passeron 1994: 3), and they try to remove that distance.

Alluded to here is the lingua franca of the academy: academic writing, or 'rhetoric and composition' or 'composition' as it is commonly known in the United States. Despite having its proponents, 'rhetoric' as discipline nomenclature has not been adopted in Australia (Woods 2007: 50), but whatever the name, uniting the field is the teaching of formal writing for academic purposes by applying principles of argument that can be traced back to rhetoricians of classical antiquity. While students in Australian universities can expect to undertake a variety of assessment tasks, especially those students in practice-based disciplines, they also can expect at some stage to write for academic purposes and in academic style. The pervasiveness of this type of written communication is evinced by widespread formal instruction that Australian universities have provided from the 1990s, following the expansion of tertiary education to accommodate larger and more diverse student cohorts. Universities have employed different models to teach academic writing (Skillen 2006), which range from remedial programs delivered centrally to discipline-based, purpose-designed units.

Reconceptualising academic writing

Because academic writing is a named activity demanded by and produced for the academy, students may readily see it as something temporarily relevant before they enter the 'real' world of work. Reinforcing this are the many generic guides to academic writing that are made available to students by universities in Australia. These may take the form of 'how-to' instruction or lists of 'dos and don'ts' that are intended to provide clear and unequivocal instruction on such matters as style, structure and presentation, especially for the academic essay. However named, academic writing is, therefore, easily perceived as a genre, in the traditional and broad sense of being a classifiable group of texts that share certain characteristics, and one that is firmly grounded in the academy.

Classifying a genre according to discernible conventions is convenient and can suit a 'how to' approach to teaching writing, but beyond that it can be limiting for both teacher and student because of its implication of oppositional and even hierarchical relations with other types of writing. This applies not only to academic writing, as has been observed by others. In defining professional writing as a field, Surma (2000) contests the superficial and oppositional distinction between 'creative' writing and 'professional' writing by drawing attention to the shared aims of each—their 'formative and transformative' potential for students—as well as the ethical, imaginative and rhetorical foundations of professional writing (which, I add, can also apply to academic writing). Hesse (2010) calls for more recognition of the common ground shared by creative writing and composition, fields that have tended to be polarised. Woods (2008) refers to 'the territory shared by all teachers of writing', despite the distinctions that can be made between the each community of practice in the fields of academic, technical, creative and professional writing. Petelin (2009), like Surma (2000), remarks upon a false hierarchy of writing based on superficial

classification, in this case when she comments on perceptions of academic writing as inferior to other fields but goes on to illustrate its pluralistic theoretical base.

Transcending a formulaic and narrow view of writing, however that writing is adjectivally qualified, calls for a conception of genre that goes beyond classification. Driving scholarship on genre in recent decades is the principle that particular social situations both give rise to, and are shaped by, genre. Following the publication of Miller's 'Genre as social action' in 1984 and subsequent theoretical developments, 'genres have come to be defined as typified rhetorical ways communicants come to recognize and act in all kinds of situations' (Bawarshi 2000: 335). A genre behaves constitutively, in terms of both texts themselves and the identities of those who produce or are represented by them (Bawarshi 2000). This is a symbiotic and formative relationship that has wide critical application, as advocated by Bawarshi with regard to English Studies, which can 'recognize and study all kinds of texts—technical, business, legal, literary, expository—as complex rhetorical actions that socialize their users into performing social roles and actions, roles and actions that help reproduce the realities they describe and enact' (2000: 357). Genre in its constitutive sense also has pedagogical application.

Carter (2007) and Woods (2008), writing from North American and Australian perspectives respectively, draw attention to the need to instil in students the ability to both recognise and negotiate literacies, including those demanded within the academy, by understanding the situated nature of writing. Carter (2007: 574) usefully refers to 'a pedagogy of rhetorical dexterity' through which teachers lead students, as writers, towards being able users of the code of a community of practice new to them, by building upon their knowledge of another, more familiar, community of practice, which is a type of scaffolded acquisition of literacy. An apt illustration of how trans-generic rhetorical dexterity may be translated into practice, in curriculum and classroom, is Woods' (2007) model for the teaching of writing whatever its orientation (academic, professional, creative and so on) within the paradigm of textual culture. The model comprises a framework of perspectives: 'rhetorics of the everyday' (with a focus on social and cultural situations), 'ethnographers of situation' (the writer as researcher-participant-observer), 'writing as creative design' (the creative use of media), 'tekhne at work' (art and craft) and 'textuality explored' (the reading, receiving, production and distribution of texts) (2007: 64). Within this framework, academic writing can be approached as a situated activity that has much in common with writing for other (professional) purposes, or, to extend the notion of scaffolded literacy, academic writing can form the conceptual and practical basis from which students make an informed and reflexive transition to the workplace, as writers.

Even without shaking any simplistically conceived generic boundaries of (academic) writing, academic writing is by its very nature difficult to excise from other writing in quite pragmatic ways. Graduates in employment inevitably will be subjected to 'the localised demands of workplace writing', which vary between organisations depending on contextual norms and represent a type of 'fine-grained localised learning' best anchored in the workplace itself (Davies & Birbili 2000: 439). Such learning tends to be informal, but it is also scaffolded, building upon what has been

acquired through formal education, especially foundational literacy skills covering such technical aspects of writing as grammar, spelling, punctuation and structure (Davies & Birbili 2000: 439-40), all of which are mainstays of the composition class. Capable application of the principles of rhetoric, another mainstay of the composition class, is 'fundamental to success in academe and industry' (Petelin 2009: 124). Thomas describes rhetoric as 'the theoretical bridge between classical and contemporary communication practices and between the academy and the professions' (2007: 1). Perhaps this is even more so for the protean careerist who can expect to write to or within organisations of various types, and for different purposes, including the overarching if indirect purpose of maintaining employability.

Thomas' reference to a theoretical bridge is a useful reminder of the higher-order knowledge, beyond technical dexterity, that is needed to make the transition between university and work. According to Davies and Birbili, this knowledge is of two types. The first, 'metacognitive knowledge about the best ways of solving the problems of writing', involves the strategies and processes of composition as well as the contextual imperatives of writing; the second, 'conceptual knowledge about the nature of writing', calls for an awareness of the responsibilities associated with writing, and the thought made possible, and demanded, by writing. Davies and Birbili contend that educators are responsible for the development of both, after which workplaces are responsible for the application of skills and knowledge (2000: 441-43).

This model, with its clear delineation of responsibility between educators and the workplace, is sensible and attractive, and it well suits traditional views of discourse communities. It does not, however, fit easily the typical profile of the protean careerist in the creative arts that emerges from Australia Council for the Arts surveys. What exactly is 'the workplace' for these careerists? It may be that the protean careerist is employed on an ongoing basis within a single organisation, but the workplace may be more amorphous, and constitute a series of shorter-term, contrasting and overlapping iterations of work or, in the case of writing grants or proposals, it may occur in isolation of others. Because of its very nature, protean workers may be denied institutional resources, including skills development opportunities that are made available to longer-term employees of organisations (Zeitz, Blau & Fertig 2009).

Taken together, these pedagogical and professional perspectives on writing point to the usefulness of the teaching of academic writing beyond its narrow generic sense to students in the creative arts as future protean careerists. It is through the academic writing class that students can have opportunities for reflective learning and practice that may help them to make informed and confident transitions between different university and professional writing contexts, and to be aware of (and interrogate) their identities as writers (Fernsten & Reda 2011). Motivating and informing this reflection, however, must be students' sensitivity to the relevance of what they learn, which can be grounded in both the academy and professional life. It is here that teachers can begin to lead students towards the 'real world' of work in quite pragmatic ways. Two illustrative examples of how this may occur are offered.

Writing, ethical and plain

If genre is constitutive, it follows that writing is socially formative and, therefore, has an essentially ethical function. Surma refers to words ‘as forms of ethical action’ (2005: 1), and to the responsibilities associated with use of written language in the professional (and by extension public) domain. Surma even advocates ‘a moral commitment to professional writing’ (2005: 11) that eschews a view of writing as something formulaically or expediently driven, in favour of a view of writing as an essentially human activity. As a form of agency, writing has consequences and brings with it responsibilities (2005: 11-12). In the classroom, writing can be contextualised and practised with an emphasis on its ethical dimension, with an obvious example being the appropriate use of evidence, inflected in both academic and other professional contexts.

The use of plain language, or plain English, is another aspect of writing that can become a focus of enquiry and practice that is related both ethically and practically to professional life. Descriptions of plain language typically identify characteristic stylistic features (for example, Petelin 2010: 212-14; Snooks & Co 2003: 53), many of which intersect with writing for academic purposes, including those that recommend economy of expression; avoidance of unnecessary jargon, acronyms, colloquialisms and so on; and the use of inclusive language. Books on English grammar, writing and style tend to draw readers’ attention to the rewards of writing plain language, and may refer to particular professional situations (see, for example, Börjars & Burridge 2010: 260-61; Cutts 2009). In the classroom, plain language can be approached as a metastyle that traverses many situations that call for formal, written communication and that responds to longstanding concerns (Orwell 1946; Watson 2003, 2005) with the standard of language in the public sphere.

Making space in the curriculum and classroom for drawing forth such principles of writing, and eliciting reflection on their application, can serve to advance students’ rhetorical fluency and confidence. Represented here is one of the earliest and most formative steps towards developing students’ capacity to recognise, engage with and respond to change, which is critical to the continuing employability that is the hallmark of the protean career and, moreover, to positions of leadership within those careers. Also represented here is academic leadership, albeit of a kind neither always prominent nor measurable. In higher education, some outcomes of teaching and learning, such as the creation of an informed citizenry, are difficult to quantify (Scott, Coates & Anderson 2008: 6), and relate to what have been called ‘the moral imperative for universities’ to contribute to societal, moral and individual wellbeing (Scott, Coates & Anderson 2008: 39). Perhaps even more difficult to quantify in this regard are the nature and extent of contributions made by academic leaders, especially when such leadership can take place in the shadow of collective and collaborative decision-making that underlies many institutional processes, such as those for the approval of curricula, or within the relative privacy of the classroom. For students in the creative arts, however, these iterations of leadership can be transformative.

Concluding comments

The premise of this paper is that the teaching of academic writing has much wider cross-disciplinary and professional application than might be reflected in the structure of academic programs, and mandatory components of them. This is not in itself revelatory, and is reflected in my own institution, in a first-year composition unit that is included as either mandatory or optional in the structures of several degree programs linked to the creative or other industries. However, in line with others (such as Surma 2005; Woods 2007, 2008) the paper also advocates an approach to the teaching of writing not restricted by generic narrowness, and a reconceptualisation of academic writing to that end. The paper translates its premise to programs in the creative arts, and typical career profiles in the creative industries, drawing on recent research (Bennett 2009; Throsby & Zednik 2010) on protean careers in the creative industries.

The proposition that Australian universities should be mindful of increasing students' awareness of how they may make the transition between the academy and professional life also is not revelatory. Universities already take steps of various kinds to do that, ranging from the publication of generic attributes to the provision of contact with prospective employers. Furthermore, easing the university-professional transition is not solely the responsibility of universities. Zeitz, Blau and Fertig (2009) claim that the model of the protean career, which they believe relies excessively on individual propensity for proactivity and networking, overlooks the institutionally (industry) based responsibility for resources necessary to support these careers. Recognition of the value of institutionalised, post-education support for protean careerists is represented by the establishment in Australia of SCOPE (Securing Career Opportunities and Professional Employment), for careerists in the creative arts and in sport, and similar 'transition centres' elsewhere (Bennett 2009: 27, 30).

Those leaders who design curricula and teach do, nevertheless, negotiate questions about what to teach and in what ways, and those in the creative arts are mindful of the protean nature of careers that likely await graduates committed to continuing their practice-based specialisations. These questions include when and how to develop metacompetencies suited to those careers. In terms of strengthening the development of generic skills, Bennett puts forward as one possibility a rethinking of the typical degree program in the creative arts:

Creative arts degrees tend to be designed around highly specialized skills; yet there are numerous generic skills common across art forms. It is possible to turn the existing degree structure inside out: placing a core of generic skills at the center of a collaborative delivery model and freeing resources for specialist streams appropriate to the needs of each individual student (2009: 33).

Those who plan these degrees will, of course, variously agree with or baulk at such a proposition, especially in an institutionally diverse sector and at a time when universities consider how best to position themselves in a deregulated environment. Moving into this environment and following the most recent Australia Council for the Arts survey of careers in the creative arts (Throsby & Zednik 2010) it is, however, timely to raise and consider questions around academic leadership in the creative arts,

particularly in terms of who is doing the leading and to where, and this special issue of *TEXT* provides the opportunity to do so. In that vein, this paper intends to add to and inflect the continuing discussion in *TEXT* and elsewhere about curriculum design and pedagogy in the creative arts, and the purpose and nature of writing programs in Australian universities.

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