University of Technology, Sydney

Camilla Nelson

Research through *practice: a reply to Paul Dawson*

Abstract
This paper is a polemical response to Paul Dawson's recent article 'Creative writing and postmodern interdisciplinarity'. It argues, contra Dawson, that it is practice and not pedagogy that is the proper object of study for an area of creative writing. Moreover, it is not sufficient for academic writers to forge a body of critical knowledge through research on *practice, but also a question of forging a body of experiential knowledge* through *practice and about process. There is a pressing need for us to think our subjects differently, to create new paradigms and methodologies, to articulate what it means to understand the world and the text from the ground of production.*

One of the key differences between creative writing and other disciplines or 'interdisciplines' in the humanities is the premium that it places on process. However, one of the key things that creative writing and other practice-based disciplines appear to lack is a critical framework capable of dealing with the concept of making. In analytical mode, practice-based academics tend to draw heavily on works from literary criticism or cultural studies, but these are bodies of knowledge that have traditionally dealt with finished objects. As Stephen Muecke (2007) recently argued at a workshop on practice as research at the University of Technology, Sydney (UTS), 'what staff and students produce as research "outcomes" in our area now rarely takes the form of commentary, critical or otherwise, on others' creative work. More often we are assembling our own texts'. Having moved away from 'commentary' or 'appreciation' to 'production' and 'assemblage', Muecke argued, we need to catch up with this shift by moving towards a 'productive, post-critical research vocabulary':

> We will be tempted then, instead of mining the text for meanings, to follow and analyse the experience of the writer writing, and the reader reading. This experiential/experimental focus looks for *singular* effects which we might identify as flashing across potential differences: between figures, allusions, forms (image, text), these potential differences generating a power which *incites* the reader. (Muecke 2007)

For practice-based academics, this is not just a question of forging a body of critical knowledge through research *on* practice, but also a question of forging a body of knowledge *through* practice and *about* process. There is a pressing need for us to think our subjects differently, to open out new areas of experiential knowledge, to create new paradigms, new methodologies; to articulate what it means to understand the world and the text from the ground of production.

Creative writing and postmodern interdisciplinarity

I wrote those notes in answer to some questions from the UTS Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences about the new types of knowledge that might arise from the field of creative writing, and as part of a broader research project I am working on in conjunction with John Dale, at the UTS Centre for New Writing.

Looking back, I can see that I rather took for granted the idea that the proper object of study for an area of creative practice was study *in*, *through* and *about* the art form. I was intrigued, therefore, to read Paul Dawson's recent article 'Creative writing and postmodern interdisciplinarity' (Dawson 2008), in which he argues that it is pedagogy and not practice that is the proper object of study for an area of creative writing, or as Dawson compellingly puts it, 'Does one teach within the discipline, or does the discipline arise from the teaching?'

In his well-received book *Creative Writing and the New Humanities*, Dawson (2005) was very much concerned with defining creative writing as a discipline, which he in turn defined in the orthodox manner as a 'body of knowledge and a set of educational techniques for imparting it'. In his more recent work, Dawson is concerned to further complicate this argument by acknowledging the ways in which - post Foucault - disciplines are seen to be constructing their own objects of study or, to put it a little more forcefully, how disciplines construct the very objects which they pretend to analyse. Here Dawson is concerned not only to highlight the dangers of disciplines, but also to cast doubt on creative writing's claim to be acknowledged as an independent discipline, or branch of knowledge. For Dawson, creative writing is not a subject or even an interdisciplinary study, but an interdisciplinary pedagogy or set of educational techniques.

Dawson's argument is buttressed by an admirably extensive set of citations, but his concern about the problematic nature of the idea of disciplines is particularly influenced by Bill Readings' (1996) *The University in Ruins*, in which Readings advocates the dissolution of traditional academic disciplines as a kind of tactical response to the problem of working within the contemporary market-orientated university - as a better way of dwelling in the ruins, as Readings puts it, of reason, culture, citizen-subject and nation. Although the emergence of interdisciplinary studies since the 1970s has worked to break down the boundaries between disciplines, Readings argues that the trend towards the institutionalization of interdisciplinary subjects like cultural studies has created a model through which the humanities is collapsed, as it were, into a single undifferentiated body of knowledge, as if the function of interdisciplinary studies was not to break down the boundaries between disciplines, or to engender a culture of questioning, but to fill in the gaps. In order to avoid the deadening hand of bureaucracy on academic life, Readings advocates the tactical use of short-term research projects in shifting interdisciplinary clusters.

For many universities, the kind of approach favoured by critics like Readings is not a direction to be advocated in theory but a working reality. For example, at UTS, as at many other 'red-brick' universities, it has long been the practice to refer to disciplines and departments as 'areas' - a deliberate attempt on the part of the faculty to engender a critical approach through the blurring of boundaries, with the intention, though not always the effect, of recreating the idea of disciplines as a 'permanent question', to use Readings' phrase (Reading 1996: 177). In pursuit of further disciplinary flux, or perhaps in recognition of an intellectual dialogue that was becoming less productive, the Writing area has

recently broken its longstanding relationship with Cultural Studies and allied itself to Media Arts Production to create a new area called Creative Practice, an event which is intended to give practice-based academics an opportunity to mark out new terrain and pose new questions. Further, over the last twelve months or more, the university has been attempting to embed a critical approach to knowledge by creating a series of interdisciplinary research clusters or strengths, which are designed to engender a series of short-term collaborative projects in the manner envisaged by critics like Readings. I use this example to suggest that it may be quite possible for a writing area to retain a critical or interdisciplinary edge, without losing its focus on art practice. In other words, I suspect that Dawson's warnings about the dangers of disciplines merely muddy the waters of what I perceive to be his underlying argument - his idea that practice is not essential to an area of creative practice, that creative texts are not the central texts or research outcomes for such an area, but scholarly articles on pedagogy are.

Predictably, Dawson's idea has engendered a degree of surprise, and even outright protest, among practice-based academics across areas as diverse as writing, journalism, visual communications and media arts, who, like myself, cannot imagine running a workshop or supervising a postgraduate student without the kind of experiential knowledge that is gained through my own writing practice. And while I firmly agree that the scrutiny of pedagogical practice is vital to the continued health of any area - as is the critical scrutiny of the ways in which disciplines are formed (or 'disciplined') and objects of study created - I cannot agree that this should be the central object of study. Moreover, I would argue that it is not sufficient for academic artists to create a body of scholarly work *on* practice (be it quantitative or qualitative). Rather, the real challenge is to generate a critical vocabulary and body of knowledge *through* and *about* practice, which I conceive as a kind of experiential knowledge capable of apprehending the process of both production and reception - writing *out of* and *into* the maelstrom of culture.

There is a burgeoning literature on creative practice as research across the academy, but I am not yet convinced that the writing area has arrived at a fully-fledged idea of what it is that we actually do. Personally, I tend to think that the idea of embodied practice is important. For example, speaking at the UTS workshop, Stephen Muecke (2007) envisaged the writer like this:

> We observe the writer. She is seated at a multimedia terminal, her intelligence and memory externalised and expanded to a whole world of data. Her text thus emerges in the interstices of a hypertext environment. It is assembled, as always, but now less historically, and more laterally and rhizomically. The anxiety of the influence of the national canon persists to the extent that there are a few paperback editions of favorite texts on the desk beside the terminal. (Muecke 2007)

This idea of writing as a kind of lateral or rhizomatic space sits a little uncomfortably in the traditional university, where the eclectic nature of writers' ideas and interests, their very rootlessness, is transformed by hegemonic academic discourse into, to use Dawson's (2008) own phrase, 'cherry picking'. Being master of no recognizable body of knowledge, creative writing is construed as the awkward or airy part of the humanities faculty - it good for public profile, important for attracting students, and consequently much loved by the university's marketing unit. But creative writing, like creative practice more generally, is not deemed to play a real part in the academic world of ideas. It is not commonly considered a research methodology, by which I mean a way of constituting new knowledge.

Academic artists are partly to blame for this. As an area we have not articulated or debated our methodologies extensively enough, or formed a very clear idea of what constitutes 'research' for us. For instance, for the purposes of writing the exegesis we often farm out our students to academics in history, art theory or literary criticism, academics who research in different ways, using different paradigms and different measures of research success. Obviously, students of writing can and do draw on those discourses, but they engage with them in a way that is fundamentally different from the way the art theorist or historian engages with those discourses and debates. For example, an historical novel may contain historical research but it does not occur in any form that is recognized by an academic historian, nor can it be judged by the values of the discipline of history.[1] Similarly, while a knowledge of the literary canon can strengthen or productively inform writing, it may also be the case that writing flourishes by misinterpreting, simplifying or distorting works and ideas that literary critics believe to be essential to literary criticism. Ultimately, I think Dawson's term 'cherry picking' underestimates the subversive potential - post-Deleuze - of skating across the surface of things.

Preface as process

Historically, creative writing is endowed with a rich exegetical literature on which an experiential theory of practice might draw. I am thinking of the kind of writing that is found in the essays, prefaces, forewords and afterwords of writers including Henry James, TS Eliot, EM Forster, George Orwell, Graham Greene, Vladimir Nabokov, Umberto Eco, Milan Kundera, David Lodge, John Barth, and more recently and perhaps controversially, James Wood.[2] Edgar Allan Poe's (1846) 'The Philosophy of Composition' provides an interesting example, as Poe writes:

> I have often thought how interesting a magazine paper might be, written by any author who would - that is to say, who could - detail, step by step, the processes by which any one of his compositions attained its ultimate point of completion. Why such a paper has never been given to the world, I am much at a loss to say - but, perhaps, the authorial vanity has had more to do with the omission than any one other cause. Most writers - poets in especial - prefer having it understood that they compose by a species of fine frenzy - an ecstatic intuition - and would positively shudder at letting the public take a peep behind the scenes, at the elaborate and vacillating crudities of thought - at the true purposes seized only at the last moment - at the innumerable glimpses of idea that arrived not at the maturity of full view - at the fully matured fancies discarded in despair as unmanageable - at the cautious selections and rejections - at the painful erasures and interpolations - in a word, at the wheels and pinions - the tackle for scene-shifting - the step-ladders and demon-traps - the cock's feathers, the red paint and the black patches, which, in ninety-nine cases out of the hundred, constitute the properties of the literary *histrio*. (Poe 1846: 743)

'The Philosophy of Composition' goes on to elaborate Poe's process in writing his poem 'The raven' in startling detail. The effect is one of demystification, a move away from the discourse of literary inspiration, madness and art muses, towards a concern for the practical. Essentially Poe wanted to explain why and

how the writer works, in a way that democratizes the relationship between reader and writer, between writing and culture.

There are many lines of descent from Poe's 'Philosophy of Composition', particularly, I would argue, because of the primacy that he gives to his concern for the effect he wishes to engender in the reader. There is an obvious line that leads from Poe to popular crime and horror genres, and the bodily affects of thrill or fear that such works aim to incite. A less obvious one leads from Poe, via poets such as Baudelaire, Mallarmé and Valéry, to writers of the French *nouvelle roman* including the anti-novels of Nathalie Sarraute, whose work is celebrated in Monique Wittig's (2007) 'The Literary Workshop'. Wittig writes:

> I put Poe at one end of the chain and Sarraute at the other in this literary movement that consists of demystifying the writer as inspired, giving explicit importance to the reader, and insisting on the writer's critical readings. (Wittig 2007: 547)

Wittig draws attention to the often-cited connection between reading and writing; as she puts it, 'writers read what others have written, write (in a dynamic movement of close contact) what others have not written (in a wrenching away from reading), and read what they write both as authors and as readers'. She continues:

> No writer can do without this work. Without this work, writing is impossible, even when - as is apparently the case traditionally - writers are wrong about themselves. There is an entire body of criticism by writers (including, for instance, Racine's prefaces to his plays) that, while lacking the systematic spirit of modern criticism or its scientific rigor (because it keeps changing levels and addressing different kinds of phenomena with the same vocabulary without creating categories like the "pure" literary critic), still indicates quite clearly the directions of research, the practice, and the preoccupations of the writers involved. Its goal is not to describe but to allow the act of making. (Wittig 2007: 550)

According to Wittig, what writers in the academy have long been accustomed to define as exegetical work - that is, a piece of critical writing that explicates a creative work that precedes it - might better be imagined as premise or process, in that the critical work of reading precedes the work of writing and reflection.

In 'Writers, Critics and Literary Authority' (2006), Dawson uses the work of the mid-twentieth century literary critic George Watson to create a taxonomy of this kind of exegetical writing. He adapts Watson's categories of the legislative (rhetorical), theoretical (philosophical) and descriptive (prefatorial); or, to quote Watson:

> For whereas the legislative critic had said "this is how a play should be written", and the theoretical critic, like Aristotle in the *Poetics*, "This is the nature of tragedy in general," Dryden simply says: "This is how I have tried to write my play and why". (cited Dawson 2006: 23)

Dawson argues that the most significant of these categories is the legislative - that is, the didactic works on rhetoric and composition via which writers, critics and other enthusiasts have laid down the 'rules' of writing, and which, in contemporary times, translates into the plethora of how-to books generated by the teaching needs of writing programs the world over. Dawson argues that this is the area in which academic writers are most capable of amassing 'literary

authority', particularly when the strategies laid out in such books are 'adapted to reflect the critical interests of contemporary scholarship' by which I assume he means continental theory, enacted in pedagogical practice (Dawson 2006: 28). For Dawson, pedagogy once again appears to be the only realm in which writers can contribute to the world of ideas with anything approaching credibility or, at least, without a fear of being slapped down.

In contrast to Dawson, Nigel Krauth (2002) argues in 'The Preface as Exegesis' that it is in the 'great exponents of the preface' such as Greene, Nabokov and Barth that a model for scholarship in writing is to be found - that is, in the works designated 'descriptive' or 'prefatorial' in Dawson's taxonomy. Krauth argues that these works, which are 'genuinely concerned with aspects of the writing process', should be understood as models for the exegetical component of students' work - and that the exegesis should be understood as an opportunity not just to 'direct' and 'prevent' readings, but as a way for students to express 'not only what their research is doing (the creative product) but also what they think the culture thinks they are doing (the researched exegesis)' (Krauth 2002).

For me, this is also the central attraction of the exegetical component of the research degree: not so much the opportunity to explicate a given work that precedes it, but also to situate that work within a culture, and elaborate the potential knowledges, or interventions in knowledge, to which the work gives rise. At the same time, I am intrigued by Wittig's idea that the exegetical works of writers are designed to engender new work rather than explain it. Either way, I think that the goal of the academic writer should *not* be to amass 'literary authority' as Dawson (2006: 28) argues. Rather, the goal should be to enquire in a writerly kind of way into the processes of writing and reading, production and reception. This is not to argue that one category in Dawson's taxonomy is superior or more important than any other, but to object to what is essentially an exclusionary move, an attempt to strike down whole categories of writing, to remove bodies of work from the scholarly field, to assemble new hierarchies of knowledge and power.

Finally, on the subject of taxonomies, it is impossible not to quote from Borges' (1964) story about 'a certain Chinese Encyclopedia' in which it is written that:

> Animals are divided into: (a) belonging to the Emperor, (b) embalmed, (c) tame, (d) sucking pigs, (e) sirens, (f) fabulous, (g) stray dogs, (h) included in the present classification, (i) frenzied, (j) innumerable, (k) drawn with a very fine camelhair brush, (l) *et cetera*, (m) having just broken the water pitcher, (n) that from a long way off look like flies. (Borges 1964: 103)

This is the impossible taxonomy with which Foucault opens *The Order of Things*, in which he explicates Borges' famous vanishing act - the way the ground of thought disappears in the absence of any conceivable conceptual space in which these wondrous and incongruous animals could coexist. But, as Foucault argues, it is precisely by putting these animals into categories, by imposing order, that the Chinese encyclopedia 'localizes their power of contagion' (Foucault 1994: iv). For Foucault, the idea of order is part of the nexus he sees between knowledge and power - it is the underlying condition of truth that constitutes what is acceptable in the scientific and social scientific discourses of any given period. In this sense, it may even be that, like the 'return of the repressed', the real trouble with writing or 'cherry picking' is that it highlights the fictional nature of all knowledge.

Creativity and bureaucracy

In 'Creative writing and postmodern interdisciplinarity' Dawson (2008) argues that fashionable terms such as practice-led research, practice as research, performative and action research represent a branch of scholarship that has been generated for purely bureaucratic ends. This is a powerful line of argument, particularly in Australia where it might be argued that rigid funding categories have been dictating the perimeters of the debate. Dawson's argument speaks to a growing fear among practice-based academics as to whether or not such arguments constitute a distortion of art practice. Dawson quotes Malcolm Gillies, who is cited in Dennis Strand's (1998) report, *Research in the Creative Arts*:

> When is a pot or a painting research, and what is the size of the research element in these items? If it were not for our ever-deepening funding crisis I suggest that we would not be much concerned with these, often ridiculous questions. (Gillies, cited Strand 1998: 27)

Gillies' argument is superficially attractive, and certainly entertaining. However, like most comedy, the joke draws its sting from its discursive context. In other words, the humour depends on an unquestioning acceptance of the traditional research paradigm promulgated by the humanities and social sciences over the past half-century or more. What academic writers need to do is eschew this paradigm altogether, to articulate what we consider to be valuable work, to articulate what 'research' means for us. This is not a utopian project - indeed, the sciences, social sciences, and humanities all have their own distinctive research paradigms, and it is only since the arrival of continental theory that their rigidities, blind spots, and dare I say fictional character, have been called into question.

As Dawson (2008) argues, it is perhaps more productive to conceive of a discipline not as a body of knowledge, but as a set of methodologies, and a series of questions. He argues that 'Can writing be taught?' has been the most common question put by writing areas in the last thirty years - but I would argue that this was at best a rhetorical question given that writing is and was being taught, and had been for a half century or more. I agree with Dawson that the question 'What makes creative writing an independent discipline?' is unduly limiting, given that the answer to this question will always allow other disciplines to define us, in that we will be defining ourselves by what we are not. I also agree with Dawson that the knowledge we impart is not 'simply knowledge of how to write' nor is it 'something related to the "content" itself of the creative work' which would make the knowledge 'as limitless and nebulous as the subjects with which writer's deal' (Dawson 2008). Perhaps a more fruitful series of questions might be 'How does it work?' or 'What are its effects?' or, better still, 'How did you arrive at your idea?'

In her lecture 'Inspiring Creativity' the novelist and academic Glenda Adams (2007) found an analogy for the writing process in the lectures given by a certain professor of archaeology at the University of Sydney, who allowed himself to think out loud in front of his students. Adams wrote:

> He allowed us to see how his mind worked, how he approached a problem, and worried it … It didn't matter that the subject was Old Javanese inscriptions … What mattered was his approach, his manoeuvring around the words on the stone, unafraid to retract one idea and put forward another, unafraid to

> speculate, revealing his doubts and uncertainties. (Adams 2007)

What I admire in Adams' paper is the way she attempted to open up rather than close down the possibilities of thought, her insistence on writing from a position of not knowing, of being uncertain, and the way this draws attention to what is contingent and fleeting in all knowledge. This finally brings me to the rather grand statement with which I concluded the notes with which I began this essay, viz: 'Understood as process, creative writing might even be a name given to the space of thinking, a space that takes us to the heart of what a university is for.'

Endnotes

1. I have written at greater length on the relationship between history and the historical novel elsewhere. See Nelson, C (2007) 'Faking it: history and creative writing', *TEXT*, 11.2, www.textjournal.com.au. Inga Clendinnen's essay on Kate Grenville's *The Secret River* is also a particularly striking example of the conflicting values of history and fiction. See Clendinnen, I. (2006) 'The history question: who owns the past?' in *Quarterly essays*, Black Inc. Melbourne, 1-72. return to text

2. See, for example, Delia Falconer's controversial review of James Wood's recent book *How fiction works* (Falconer, D 2008 'Colossal critic, reality check needed,' *ALR*, May, at www.theaustralian.news.com.au). I have also written critically about James Wood's essays on writing in Nelson, C 2008 'You can't write a social novel after September 11', *New writing: the international journal for the practice and theory of creative writing*, 5.1. return to text

List of works cited

Adams, G 2007 'Inspiring creativity'. Lecture delivered at the University of Technology, Sydney, 31 May return to text

Borges, JL 1964 'The analytical language of John Wilkins', in JL Borges, *Other inquisitions 1937-1952* (trans Ruth LC Simms), Austin: University of Texas Press, 101-105 return to text

Dawson, P 2005 *Creative writing and the new humanities*, London: Routledge return to text

Dawson, P 2006 'Writers, critics and literary authority,' in N Krauth and T Brady (eds), *Creative writing: theory beyond practice*, Teneriffe: Post Pressed, 21-32 return to text

Dawson, P 2008 'Creative writing and postmodern interdisciplinarity', *TEXT* 12.1, www.textjournal.com.au/april08/dawson.htm return to text

Foucault, M 1994 *The order of things: an archaeology of the human sciences*, New York: Vintage/Random House return to text

Krauth, N 2002 'The preface as exegesis', *TEXT* 6.1, www.textjournal.com.au/april02/krauth.htm return to text

Muecke, S 2007 'Practice as research - writing and cultural studies'. Presented at WCS and MAP Workshop, University of Technology, Sydney return to text

Poe, EA 1846 'The philosophy of composition', *Graham's magazine*, 28 April, 163-67, www.eapoe.org return to text

Readings, B 1996 *The university in ruins*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press return to text

Strand, D 1998 *Research in the creative arts*, Evaluations and Investigations Programme, Higher Education Division. Canberra: Department of Employment, Education, Training and Youth Affairs return to text

Wittig, M 2007 'The literary workshop' (trans C Temerson and S Zeig), *GLQ: A journal of lesbian and gay studies* 13.4, 543-51 return to text

Camilla Nelson is currently working on a project about research through practice in conjunction with Associate Professor John Dale, at the UTS Centre for New Writing. She is the author of two novels, Perverse Acts*, for which she was named one of the* Sydney Morning Herald*'s Best Young Australian Novelists of the Year, and* Crooked*, which is to be published by Random House in September. Camilla has been a judge of the NSW Premier's Literary Awards and the Kathleen Mitchell Award, and was recently appointed to the board of the NSW Writer's Centre. She has a Masters degree in History and a Doctorate of Creative Arts. She lectures in writing at UTS.*

TEXT
Vol 12 No 2 October 2008
http://www.textjournal.com.au
Editors: Nigel Krauth & Jen Webb
Text@griffith.edu.au