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Literacies in transition: students and the journey in the discipline of writing

Abstract

This paper argues for recognition of shared goals and purposes for all teachers of writing (professional, creative, academic, technical) while acknowledging the intrinsic differences in their domains. It argues as well for an assertion of a discipline of writing, in professional and public contexts, so that the public including our students might acknowledge the activities and processes of the discipline. While the debates on these matters have been aired in TEXT and other forums for some time, the proposition enunciated here is prompted by reflections on the preliminary findings of a study, part of a collaborative international project, to examine students' perceptions of their writing and reading practices and of their needs as writers in transition into and through an undergraduate writing program. Early data about student perceptions and expectations have raised issues relevant to the debates about teaching writing (and reading) and how writing courses are perceived, prompting the reflections offered in this paper. Such speculations lead to the suggestion that as writing teachers we adopt a pedagogical principle of supporting all our students to develop inter alia what Shannon Carter (2007: 574) has termed 'rhetorical dexterity', and that this might be aligned with an acceptance of the imagination as a tool in all writing [1] particularly as the digital medium changes reading and writing practices and the design, production and reception of texts.

Introduction

One of the privileges available to the academic who presents a paper either at a conference or for publication is that it creates the opportunity for dialogue between author and audience or reviewer. Occasionally the experience is painful, sometimes affirming, but most often it is provocative and intellectually stimulating. Such has been the case as I considered the reviewers' comments on the first version of this paper. I am grateful for their responses and I agonised over ways to respond to the thoughtful commentary offered. Would I radically alter the organization of the paper so that it followed a traditional framework with the argument offering a proposition supported by evidence? Would I add more to position the paper in the context of current debates about writing and allow this as a starting point for an argument about conceptualising writing as a discipline? Would I respond to the claim from one reviewer that this paper was a report of a research project and not about creative writing and that thus it seems not to be quite appropriate to *TEXT*? Implicit in this remark is the idea that creative writing is somehow quite separate from writing of other kinds and that discussion of other kinds of writing or literacies (reading and writing practices) is not the business of *TEXT*. Yet, as Brophy reminds us in a charming and insightful essay ('Literacy: what is it for?', in his 2003 book), literacy is 'an archive'. He goes on:

Words - those ideas made of air in our mouths, that human purring - can now be kept for hundreds, thousands of years on paper and other surfaces. Traces of language and lost ways of thinking. Reminders of sounds. When a word is written down something happens. A vibration in time has left a trace. A thought in the form of a word has left a record of its presence. Evidence and information. (Brophy 2003: 27)

Creative artefacts (such as poems), says Brophy, are archives because 'They capture and preserve for us the voice of a person, a time, a movement; they are eclectic, anarchic, unpredictable repositories of the details of living, the details of the mind, the impossible, the silly, the useless and the trivial' (2003: 26). Brophy also includes a range of other writing in the archive of literacy:

To teach a child enough for them to write a shopping list or send a birthday message or jot down a thought before it escapes too far into the past, to pass a cheeky joke in class, to write graffiti on a wall: all of this becomes a part of the vast anarchic archive of the literate. (2003: 27)

Creative writing, professional writing, and general writing courses in these terms all deal with the same thing, and Brophy has captured it well. I would argue that this is the domain of *TEXT* and its contributors. In this vein, if this paper stands for anything then it is for an understanding of the significance of linking imagination, rhetorical practice, and literacy; in short the essential focus of the writing teacher who works with student writers and readers to help them develop their capacity to use words.

The reality of writing for academic publication is that we rarely show how we have engaged with the reviewers' comments. This is the hidden side of academic work. Sometimes an essay (after review and revision) is published alongside invited responses to demonstrate a dialogue of sorts. However, we rarely speak directly of the task of responding to the reviewer. Part of me wanted to take several of the reviewers' comments and allow them as a kind of meta-discourse alongside the original paper. Another wanted simply to explain my intention in presenting the paper in the original form. The solution I reached is partly represented in this introduction because it allows me to engage with the reviewing process directly. So let me lay my cards on the table and describe what I think publication in *TEXT* as the journal of the Australian Association of Writing Programs (AAWP) can be, for this stance is implicit in what I have attempted here.

Firstly the issues are ideological and philosophical; that is, concerned with how we deal with writing as a discipline. Secondly, the issues are about the very nature of writing for academic publication. Thus the question of interest to me is, can we break free of the conventional rhetorical organization of the academic article and attempt something different?[2]

I hold a firm position that those of us in the business of teaching writing, of whatever variety, are engaged in a shared enterprise. This does not detract from the need for us to assert a place in the Australian academy for creative writing as a discipline to flourish - which clearly it does, given its place in almost all Australian universities. The discussion of its relationship to literary studies, English, cultural studies or communication studies or to the broad field of professional writing has been ongoing, as is evidenced in many articles in the back issues of *TEXT* and in, for example, *Creative Writing and the New Humanities* (Dawson 2005); *Creative Writing: Theory Beyond Practice* (Krauth and Brady 2006); *Creativity: Psychoanalysis, Surrealism and Creative Writing*

(Brophy 1998); and *Public and Professional Writing: Ethics, Imagination and Rhetoric* (Surma 2005).

While Australian academics have positioned writing in higher education primarily by asserting the value and place of creative writing and, to a lesser extent, business and professional writing, the US context has been driven, on the one hand, through composition, rhetoric and research in written communication (with ongoing debate about how these fit alongside English, literature or cultural studies) and, on the other, through creative writing courses taught often within fine arts programs.[3] It behoves us to be aware of such debates, even though the history of writing in the academy in Australia has not positioned writing as a 'service discipline' (as, one reviewer suggested, might be inferred from the original version of this paper). Nor would I wish to do so. Rather, I note the impact of creative writing in the Australian context, as Brophy in *Explorations in Creative Writing* neatly offers: 'There are deep and radical changes happening under the surface in both tertiary education and the literary culture of Australia as a result of the development of creative writing courses' (2003: 216).

Since Brophy penned these words the debates about research outputs, the creative artefact as research, the relationship between artefact and exegesis and the issue of what journals count for research outputs have continued apace. In the same period, configurations within universities and TAFE have placed the sub-disciplines of writing in various alliances: departments or schools of professional and creative communication; creative industries; communication; English; media and cultural studies; the permutations are myriad. Inside these bureaucratic entities we find colleagues teaching literature, creative writing, public relations, business communication, technical writing, writing for academic and professional purposes.

As a teacher (variously over the years in many of these areas), I feel the need for a consolidated and shared sense of purpose about how, from the time they enter tertiary education, we engage our students as readers and writers. What they write and how they write and for whom they write are the rhetorical issues of the sub-classifications of the writing discipline and pedagogy. We also need to know what students bring with them to tertiary study as readers and writers, what they expect and what they perceive they need, whether they are in a general writing program, a creative writing course, a combined literature and writing program or a communication and media course.

Whether we teach literary studies and practice, creative writing, English for academic purposes, technical communication, professional writing or business communication - indeed any of the sub-disciplines of writing - we have a commitment to supporting students in making the transition into and then a pathway through academe. The concomitant of this, I maintain, is that the AAWP should be the professional home for all teachers of writing - professional, technical, creative, academic, business - for this is the forum where we should be particularly conscious of what it is we can offer students who need to develop, *inter alia*, what Shannon Carter has termed 'rhetorical dexterity' (2007: 574).

This brings me to the second point in this introduction: how to organise this paper? I chose to take a somewhat Montaignian approach to the task: allowing a starting point of recounting almost anecdotally to allow thoughts and issues gradually to evolve, to make a case incrementally for the discipline of writing. [4] That starting point is a description and discussion of an international global research project on Literacies in Transition, being conducted by a group of scholars from around the world. I start then with the story of how the research

project came into being, how a trial revealed some interesting student responses about how they see themselves as writing students, and how these responses prompt reflections on their writing and reading practices.[5] By visiting issues generated by the student responses, and using these as catalysts for rumination, I hope to encourage renewed discussion about how as teachers we might locate ourselves as writers, researchers and teachers in writing. It might be that we should be prepared to consider writing as a discipline with sub-disciplines. Perhaps with this broader concept of the discipline we might have the capacity to argue for its pedagogies, research activities and outputs with the strength of a shared set of aims and purposes.

And so to begin

In late 2006 I attended the SIG Writing Conference in Antwerp.[6] One of the papers presented there revealed how few wideranging studies of students' experience and expectations of writing and reading at university had actually been conducted (Rogers 2006). Case studies of individual students and their progress through university have been the source, particularly in the US, of information about student experiences. Most of these studies are based in the US (eg Stuckey 1991; though note Foster 2002, and Foster and Russel 2002, which offer some international perspectives). Other papers spoke of the demands on students applying for university in the UK and the US whereby they must produce an essay exam or extended personal essay to accompany their application (Poe 2006; Oliver 2006). O'Donahoe offered some specific analysis drawn from cross-cultural studies of academic writing (O'Donahoe 2006, 2008). Discussions following these papers set a small group of scholars thinking about students and what they bring to university (or college), and what their expectations and understandings are of the kinds of writing and reading they will encounter in the transition from school (or perhaps workplace, or another educational institution or education system) into tertiary study.

Out of this discussion was borne a collaborative international project, involving academics from universities in the UK, US, France and Australia.[7] The initial focus was on what we have described as 'Literacy Narratives in the Secondary School to University Transition'. However, this has been adjusted to allow for the many students who come from other contexts into university, or from different education systems perhaps into postgraduate study. The important issue is that of transition into the writing and reading environment of the university and what students bring with them and what they make of the journey through university.

The project - literacies in transition

The project team posed a core question: what characterises the literacy experiences of students as they make transitions from one educational context to another? However, as this is an international collaboration we are well aware of the differences across countries so we have also discussed the following questions: How do national contexts play a role in the shaping of transitional literacy practices? How are these practices embedded in international systems of relation and influence, including dominant national ideologies of learning, systemic aspects of education and surrounding cultural and familial practices? [8]

We are also particularly interested in the meta-issues of actually conducting international research in this area. Thus we set ourselves the threefold goal: to

understand transitional literacy practices within and across national borders; to develop research methods and theoretical tools for studying cross-nationally in qualitative ways which do not rely simply on a test-like performance; and to understand how writing and reading practices are nationally shaped, but at the same time embedded in international systems of policy, economy and migration.

Who are our students and what is they bring with them to our classes? How do they think of themselves as they approach university study? What courses are they about to encounter? Writing courses? Discipline-specific studies? Workplace related projects? We talk of the need for them to develop academic, professional and creative writing skills. Thus, when we consider the range of rhetorical and discourse structures we and they encounter every day, what skills might they need? What should they experience as they develop their skills as writers and readers across genres and in multi modes of representation? Such questions have been asked before but times, students, contexts and tools of trade in the metier of writing and representation change. To discover something of the literacy experiences, expectations and needs of students today prompts us to ask these questions anew.

The group has gradually refined the main research question and related sub questions and designed a survey instrument, a questionnaire to be given to small pilot groups of students within each of the institutions. At the University of South Australia (hereafter UniSA), the students involved are those who enter a BA with a major in writing and creative communication. In the US and UK contexts, students tended to be in general composition or writing for academic purposes courses. In France, the students surveyed were in a mix of literature, first level writing or education courses (O'Donahoe 2008). Data was collected from a survey questionnaire adapted for each context but covering a shared set of issues and questions.[9]

At UniSA we devised a questionnaire, adapted from a draft prepared by O'Donahoe for her situation at l'Université de Lille. We have trialled this questionnaire with follow-up in-class group discussions, in classes at first year and second year levels. We will also involve third years and honours (fourth year) students in the project because we are interested in what happens as they near the end of their studies and can reflect on their literacy skills, needs and perceptions.[10] We decided to conduct the survey as an in-class exercise so that there was opportunity to engage students in a discussion (as a large focus group activity) after they had completed the questionnaire. We felt this would give an opportunity for students themselves to be reflective practitioners of their own processes and experiences. The classes in which we trialled the questionnaire are core courses within the writing major, so we anticipated that students might have clearly articulated expectations about the pathway on which they are travelling. Their responses provided us with the wherewithal for reflection on our pedagogies and also on how they perceive themselves as writers and readers, and writing in the university context.[11]

Reflections on student responses

The first results surprised us with the relatively minimal awareness shown by some first year students of the possibilities for writing and of what they might achieve or develop as writers, despite the fact that they had chosen a writing major with its dual emphasis on creative and professional writing. A mid-year intake of first year students (new students enrolled in a writing major) seemed to be interested in honing their skills to write for magazines such a *WHO*

Weekly. This seemed also to be their reading diet, alongside computer games, email, and Facebook and MySpace. Of course our experience with many others of our current students indicates that this might in fact be a somewhat aberrant group. Yet without labouring the point, the response suggested a need to acknowledge the digital, technological and related commercial contexts in which students operate and the ephemeral nature of the representational world students inhabit.

The world in which students operate, suggests Geoffrey Ulmer, is one not just of literacy but of 'electracy'; that is, electronic meaning making often tied to celebrity culture and to the way they access this through the internet (cited in Rice 2006). Rice paraphrases Ulmer noting that in the movement from literacy to electracy:

we devise various strategies for producing knowledge based on our association with institutions of learning: school, work, family, and entertainment. What literacy was to print, Ulmer argues, electracy is to the digital. Within electracy, entertainment and celebrity play dominant roles in how we construct notions of selfhood and how we produce ideas. (Rice 2006: 105)

Rice proposes that the concept of electracy be added to the concept of literacy studies because celebrity culture (which is what the concept of electracy acknowledges as being made available through digital media) is as much a determiner of identity and belonging today as are family, work and school. This might give us a way of thinking about our group of first year students and their focus on celebrity in their reading of *WHO Weekly* and their stated aims to write such material for both traditional commercial print publication and the digital media, terrain with which students are blithely familiar and at ease.

As the visual, the moving image and animations seem to take precedence in most students' lives, the dominance of the written word as a form of representation is being challenged. Commenting on the impact of visual technologies and how these 'have changed the way we see, the way we perceive ourselves and/in the world', Schirato and Webb note, 'Now the digital manipulation of images extends the argument further, contributing to a growing crisis not just of vision, but of meaning and being' (Schirato and Webb 2004: 56). Thus, they explain:

Dinosaurs lumber across screens, moving precisely like living creatures; and texts like *Tomb Raider*, confections of pixels - v-actors (virtual actors) - are becoming almost indistinguishable from human actors. No visual image can be trusted, because all are potentially able to be digitally enhanced or manipulated. (2004: 56)

For many students, the activities of writing and of reading for and in print seem, in comparison to this digital world (or the ephemera of the *WHO Weekly*), to be analogous to the era of the steam train. Both demand time, attention to detail, careful application of specific skills and a persistence in gradually developing those skills. The digital medium demands a new set of skills and literacy practices; it provokes a new rhetorical impetus. The digital era, says Richard Lanham, has created 'the economics of attention' (Lanham 2006). He notes that, in this digital era, 'Attention is the commodity in short supply' because we are inundated with information and we simply cannot attend to it all. There is a consequence in terms of the economics of allocating what is a scarce resource (2006: xi). A rhetoric of the digital is emerging

whereby a different process of calling attention to what is being said must rely on skills of design and new forms of organising information. He asks:

What's new about the digital expressive space and what's not?
... What happens when words move from printed page to
electronic screen? What's next for text? ... What's new about
the "new economy" and what's not? (2006: xi)

Pertinent to the work of teaching writing is his comment:

Seeing clearly what is happening to the word as it moves from
page to screen seems, to me at least, to depend on seeing
clearly what is happening in the world that expressive field has
to express. Both are battles for attention as the scarce resource.
(2006: xi)

Our students' world, even more so than ours, because we have been raised in the attention-strong world of books, is 'attention challenged'. This has an impact on how they see themselves as readers and writers and how we as teachers then support the development, including the assessment of their writing. In a discussion of how we need to redefine writing and our work as teachers, Andrea Lunsford comments:

while the field of rhetoric and writing has led the way in how
best to assess traditional forms of academic writing, we are
now engaged in the complex work of assessing forms of
digital, multimedia, and performed writing. (Lunsford 2007:
13)

She observes: 'There is no doubt in my mind that these "compelling discursive modalities" - webtexts, films, radio essays, multimedia presentations - are here to stay and that they, in fact, constitute the heart of what students of a new rhetoric need to learn and practice' (2007: 13).

Accepting that these are the realities for our students, it is imperative that we continue to question our approach to students and their literacy practices and reflect on how they see themselves and define their identities in and through the media that pervades society. Writing students come to university to write (creatively, professionally) but they also engage in other studies. So we ask: What do we expect? What do students expect? How can writing pedagogy operate in the academy to allow for students' needs and expectations?

Into university

While perhaps not couched in these terms, these are the sorts of questions that are asked by teachers in high schools, by university departments other than those for whom writing and reading are the *modus operandi* and focus of study, that is English/writing/communication, and by academics in these departments as well. University lecturer and student adviser at the University of Sydney, Liam Semler, describes the situation for many school leavers and new university students thus:

In barely four months many of these students along with other
students throughout the country who completed the higher
levels of English in Year 12 will be attending their first lectures
in junior units of study in university English departments. In
less than six months they will be submitting their first pieces of

written work for assessment at university level. Shortly after that, for a proportion of students, the grade on their first assignment will leave them astonished. ... These high achievers are shocked to find markers' comments reducing to rubble their grammar, style, literary analysis, composition of argument and engagement with secondary material. (Semler 2007)

Semler focuses on the discordance between students' experience of high school studies in English and literature and what they need to learn when they come to University. His description could well apply to students reaching for success in handling the academic discourses of other disciplines or the critical components of professional and creative writing courses. He notes:

The finely honed skills that were rewarded in Year 12 suddenly become deficits in first year essays. Known terms and methods turn out to be unknown, misunderstood or misapplied. (2007)

In short, a student in transition from high school to university must work out how to operate within a different paradigm for reading, writing and organising knowledge; a new 'paradigm of scholarship'. The academic's role in this, according to Semler, is that of an unwitting coloniser: 'academics teaching first year also need to be aware that they are engaged in a colonising project'. They are colonisers because they are not attuned to the high school (or other) learning experience, not aware of what the student already understands about writing academically in the non-university context, and are intent on 'expunging' and replacing the students' previous set of skills with the discursive practices they themselves have honed over many years.

The shock of 'university' reading

More than this, however, is the demand placed on students as readers before they can even contemplate producing a written response. At UniSA, in reviewing the data from the surveys and the in-class discussions, Paul Skrebels noted that the most pronounced comments from second year writing students in response to the survey were about the culture shock of transition to university study as readers. As writers, they may not have particularly elaborated notions of what writing might potentially yield for them as practitioners, but they make an assumption that they can 'do it'. As he says, 'our students take it for granted that they'll be expected to undertake various writing tasks, and are willing to immerse themselves in the "discipline" (in all senses of the term) of this field of endeavour' (Skrebels working notes 2008). Their new awareness of making the transition to 'university' reading is more significant for their literacy practices in the academic context.

Students were confident of their ability to read for daily purposes and for pleasure, but commented on their need to develop the ability to read so that their reading could influence their writing; to vary their reading to extend the breadth and depth of their writing; and to learn how to read closely so that they can apply such skills to revising their work. Their responses cause us to reflect on how 'university' reading differs from the reading for pleasure in which, as their responses indicate, they all engage (although in widely differing forms). [12] How can we extend students' skills as they engage in reading for literary or professional practice? That is, how can we support them to read effectively across an array of complex texts (literary/ academic/technical)? How can we teach in such a way that they gain confidence in dealing with such texts? Or, as

Skrebels notes: How can we help them get past the 'This is boring crap' stage and become readers with a repertoire of strategies for skimming, selecting, filtering, focussing on particularities - reading 'through' a text, paying close attention to its textuality, and reading critically (Skrebels working notes 2008).

It is a question of how one becomes an insider in the academy. As Penrose points out, for teachers it is a case of how not to undermine student confidence (Penrose 2002: 457). Penrose reviews qualitative (case study) research on students' literacy experiences as well as quantitative studies specifically focussed on first generation students. Her descriptive quantitative study examines students' performance during their college studies. She explores first generation students' self perceptions of their skills as readers and writers, of their academic skills more generally and of their perceived readiness of college. In particular she concludes that for first generation students who do not come from a background experience in academic discourses and processes, the need to be supported in developing an identity within the academy is imperative to their continued success. While there are many factors at work, for these students it is the 'sense of entitlement' to participate and a 'sense of belonging (that) may be critical' (2002: 459). Acknowledging that these issues have long been discussed by academics, and particularly by those in writing, rhetoric and composition, she concludes:

Writing teachers and researchers need to continue to explore pedagogies that will concentrate their efforts not just on validating personal identity or on demystifying the conventions of academic communities but also on helping students forge identities as members of those communities. (2002: 459)

'Rhetorical dexterity'

One way forward has been proposed by Carter with her attention to what she terms 'rhetorical dexterity'. In dealing with students in a particular context (the Bible belt of the US) where the gap between 'liberal academics and evangelical Christians' can be 'difficult to traverse', she advocates a 'pedagogy of rhetorical dexterity' (2007: 573). She describes this as 'an approach that trains writers to effectively read, understand, manipulate and negotiate the cultural and linguistics codes of a new community of practice ([see] Lave and Wenger), based on a relatively accurate assessment of another more familiar one' (2007: 574); that is, the literacy skills they already possess (in this case, those honed on biblical study) to negotiate those the academy expects.

This in itself is not perhaps a new strategy. However, she takes this a step further when she aligns the approach with the New Literacy Studies (NLS) of Street and others (see Street 2005) and with activity theory (2007: 579). The point is that students are encouraged to understand how literacy practices operate in cultural and social contexts:

NLS ... redefines literacy education ... as a matter of reading and negotiating various contextualised forces that are deeply embedded identity formation, political affiliations, material and social conditions, and ideological frameworks. This theoretical framework necessarily flattens hierarchies among literacies; instead of one literacy's being inherently more significant or valuable than another, their respective worth is determined by appropriateness to context. (2007: 579)

Pertinent to the way we might think of the needs of students in the Australian context is to understand literacy 'as social rather than alphabetic, situated rather than universal, and multiple rather than singular'. The consequence is that such a view 'requires writers to consider themselves as simultaneously literate and illiterate in a number of different contexts' (2007: 578). Thus in teaching writing for students in transition from somewhere outside the academy into university discourses and practices we can encourage them to think of literacy in a different way: 'literacy not as an abstract set of rigid standards but rather as a blend of mutable social forces deeply situated in time and place' (2007: 579). This is also relevant to developing what Brophy has called the 'literacy archive' and it applies, I suggest, to creative writing, professional communication, general communication courses, or English for academic purposes or business communication.

The core of our business in teaching writing is providing a sense of the 'communities of practice' in which our students are moving and which demand that they develop a confident rhetorical dexterity. Indeed this implies that we should be concerned with 'teaching realistic and useful conceptions of writing'. (Downs & Wardle 2007: 557). Downs and Wardle suggest that this would mean a shift away from the concept of teaching academic writing as a set of generic skills to enabling students to see writing as 'neither basic nor universal but content-and-context contingent and irreducibly complex' (2007: 557-58). This fits well with Carter's position. Downs and Wardle propose that first year composition in the US context be re-envisioned as a course 'about writing' with an aim 'to improve students' understanding of writing, rhetoric, language, and literacy in a course that is topically oriented to reading and writing as scholarly inquiry and encouraging more realistic understandings of writing' (2007: 553). They see this research based course as a stepping-stone to enable students to operate more effectively in academic discourses in the disciplines. The re-envisioned first year composition course 'Introduction to Writing Studies', which they propose, focuses on this pedagogical aim through close attention to such issues as: 'How does writing work? How do people use writing? What problems are related to writing and reading and how can they be solved?' (2007: 558).

Writing - a shared territory

These are questions all teachers of writing pose as they work with student writers. I ask such questions of students writing a creative piece, or an ethnographic report or a creative nonfiction essay or memoir. As writing teachers of whatever persuasion we ask our students to respond to and reflect on their own writing and the writing of others. If you are a poet you become part of a 'community of practice'; if you an essayist, if you write fiction for young adults, if you write short stories or a play script, you participate as member of writing community. You apply your skill with words to cajole, to entice, to compel attention, using your imagination to address the reader. It is not only the creative writer who calls on the imagination to engage with reader, says Surma; professional writers need to work creatively and imaginatively too:

When writing is understood as an imaginative process, then, it is necessarily an activity that is other-oriented, one interested in forging or extending relations between the writing self and others or otherness. To bring to the fore the imaginative dimension of professional writing is to draw attention to the complex process of conceptualising an appropriate ethical and

rhetorical relationship (text) between writers, subject and readers. (2005: 30)

Here is shared territory for all writers. And while the Downs and Wardle first year composition course about writing and writing studies is not specifically relevant in the Australian context, their proposal is underpinned by an acknowledgement of the territory shared by all teachers of writing and thus manifest in some way in all writing courses. Their concluding argument is that the proposed course might lead 'toward full disciplinarity, a fulfilment marked by courses that come from our research and theory, pedagogy that comes from our common knowledge, and a public awareness of what we do' (2007: 578). [13] It is this proposition that is salient when we consider the needs of our students, as they enter and make a transition to university.[14] It aligns with the contention in this paper that we might think of writing as a discipline: a discipline comprising 'body of knowledge which generates theory and research' and 'sub-branches of that knowledge' (Brady & Krauth 2006: 14).[15] If so, then we need to theorise it in terms of the practices of reading, writing, design and use of available technologies, text production and reception, that underpin and drive pedagogy and research in the field of writing.

Taking up the challenge to theorise the teaching of writing, Paul Dawson outlines clearly what is required when he asserts the centrality of reading and of a theory of literature to the disciplinary endeavour:[16]

The teaching of writing cannot proceed without a theory of what constitutes literature, of how the creative process works, and of how a pedagogy based on these two things operate. The fundamental theoretical premise which underpins the pedagogy of Creative Writing is that the process of writing can be demystified and examined critically, even by those who employ nebulous phrases such as "discovering a voice" and "tapping into the unconscious". Furthermore, reading is considered critical to the writing process, first by the practice of criticism, and secondly by understanding the critical faculty as an essential element of the creative process itself. (Dawson 2006: 28) [17]

Other scholars writing in *TEXT* over many years have also made this point: clear evidence of the way scholars in writing value their role as teachers of reading. This is important to note, given the sort of criticism frequently made of creative writing courses. Michael Wilding for example, condemned creative writing teachers and students as 'having little or no interest in books by other people.' He claims, presumably on anecdotal evidence alone, 'They all want to write, but have little interest in reading' (Wilding 2008). The responses by UniSA students to the preliminary survey suggest otherwise. As students of writing, in a program aimed at professional, creative and technical communication and writing, literary and textual practice, they seem to be aware of their needs as readers for academic and recreational purposes, curiously less anxious about their role as writers but increasingly attuned to the interplay between their reading and writing, as they step into and through their university studies in writing and complementary disciplines.

Concluding remarks

Anne Surma has long claimed that professional writing is a 'creative, critical and dialogic process' (Surma 2005: 17). I contend that writing of any ilk can be

so described; a proposition surely highlighted by the impact of the electronic and digital revolution. Every writer now has the capacity to work in an online environment, which prompts the creative, the imaginative, the practical, the critical, the dialogic, and the professional processes of writing.[18] In such an environment there is perhaps a blurring of the distinction between the different territories of writing. Surma makes the point that, 'The development of emerging writers' awareness (as both writers and readers) of texts as both formative and transformative are aims shared by both creative and professional writing disciplines' (2005: 19). To this proposition we might add acknowledgement of Downs and Wardle's assertion of the content and context contingency and irreducible complexity of writing.

The responses to the student survey and the focus group discussions have prompted reflection on the issues of importance to students in a writing program and suggest the need for a clearly articulated and publicly professional approach to the discipline of writing, and one that is firmly and overtly articulated in a pedagogy for the a university education increasingly dominated by Lanham's 'economics of attention' and in a new era of rhetorical praxis, driven by the digital medium as much as by the technology of print texts. Neither is a neutral conduit says Lanham: the digital, however, 'creates a different rhetoric that puts words, written and spoken, in new juxtapositions with picture and sound' (2006: 248). He continues:

It creates a dynamic, three-dimensional space in which traditional academic disciplines take on new relationships and in which conceptual thought undergoes a radical dramatization and design emerges as a central organizational discipline. (2006: 248)[19]

Our role then as teachers is to enable students to build their literacy archives and thus to engage with words, images, and sound and to use them creatively, imaginatively, purposefully and ethically. I would argue that our students should see us as teachers of writing and as professionals in the discipline of writing; one that clearly acknowledges the impact of the technologies on all writing and reading practices, whatever the sub-discipline of the field. No matter which of the writing courses they take, they should understand and acknowledge themselves as students of the discipline that is complex, contingent, transformative, formative, creative and critical.

Endnotes

1. See Anne Surma 2005: 29. Surma makes a case for imagination as a significant 'reflective, practical and political tool' and a tool that has an important role in professional writing - and by implication not just as a tool in creative writing. return to text
2. See for example Cushman, 'The Rhetorician as an Agent of Social Change' (Cushman 1996) in which she uses a combination of footnotes, endnotes and symbols denoting different voices and perspectives as a way of presenting multiple perspectives on a topic; with a paper 'organised as a set of mirrors'. return to text
3. See for example Mayers 2005 (*Re) Writing Craft - Composition, Creative Writing, and the Future of English Studies*; Kopelson 2008 'Sp(l)itting Image; Or Back to the Future of (Rhetoric and?) Composition'; or Fulkerson 2005 'Summary and Critique: Composition as the Turn of the Twenty-First Century'. return to text
4. Paul Heilker describes Montaigne's essays as having a chronological rhetorical design. He suggests that this is a form of 'thinking-writing', which is not an 'unrepressed, unfiltered way of thinking-writing but rather one that imposes new and sometimes difficult obligations on both the writer and reader'. The writer, he says (paraphrasing Montaigne), 'must stay attentive to his

subject and not lose it ... continually offering the attentive reader some "sufficient word" that allows her to see how his ideas follow one another even when they do so at a distance and with a "side-long" glance' (Heilker 1996: 27). return to text

5. Undertaking a research project about students as writers and readers, that is about their literacy practices, seems to me to be an essential activity for writing teachers as researchers. If this allows us to say something about what we might offer writing students of any ilk, then such research has value. return to text

6. Special Interest Group Writing, European Association for Research in Learning and Instruction, EARLI. return to text

7. The scholars involved are from the Institute of Education, University of London; North Carolina State University; L'Université de Lille; MIT; and University of South Australia. They teach across a range of writing courses, including creative writing, writing for academic purposes, composition, writing for the professions. return to text

8. These questions formed the basis for a panel discussion, offered at the *Writing Across Borders* conference in Santa Barbara in February 2008, where members of the group offered their preliminary findings. return to text

9. Mia Stephens and Paul Skrebels gathered preliminary data in the first trial use of a questionnaire followed by in-class discussion with several groups of students in core courses in the writing and creative communication program at University of South Australia. return to text

10. Mia Stephens volunteered her professional and creative communication 1 class from Semester 2, because it is usually taken by mid-year intake first years, including international students. Paul Skrebels offered his professional and creative communication 2 class, students in the writing major who are now well into the second year of their program. We plan to involve Level 3 and the honours' students so that we can gain some sense of the differences in expectations and perhaps students' changing perceptions of themselves, their needs and their expectations, over the period of their university studies. return to text

11. Students at the University of South Australia are studying in an undergraduate major in writing and creative communication. The sequence includes compulsory courses and options. The compulsory courses cover a wide range of reading and writing activities and assessments, and are conducted in workshop style classes. Our particular curriculum, with a focus on what I term 'a rhetoric of textual culture', sets the scene for their work as writers and readers (Woods 2006, 2007). return to text

12. This is consistent with the findings discussed by Jolliffe and Harls in a recently published article about a project in which they explored the reading habits and process of students majoring in English literature. Students are discovered to be confident readers, but spend little time in reading for their studies. They spent a lot of time reading online documents and Facebook, and read while doing something else (Jolliffe & Harls 2008: 605). They have 'regular, steady, full reading lives in which they engaged with a wide variety of texts for reasons both academic and non academic' (2008: 607). return to text

13. In a response to Downs and Wardle, Miles and Pennell et al suggest that the focus on a writing studies course only at first year level (FYC) 'limits disciplinary thinking'. They 'advocate an approach extending beyond First Year, based on a more complex and inclusive view of Writing Studies ... a more generative framework, thinking vertically' (Miles & Pennell et al 2008: 504). They too advocate a 'full disciplinarity' of writing pedagogy linked to research, theory linked to practice, but one which should be a dynamic in its embrace of 'multimodalities of research and scholarship' (2008: 510). Their proposal is firmly embedded in the US context of composition scholarship and is a response to the stranglehold of Freshman Composition. By contrast in the Australian context, a 'full disciplinarity' as I see it would extend across all branches of the writing discipline. return to text

14. The preliminary feedback from the first year writing students in the survey suggests a relatively limited understanding of 'what we do' and thus of what they might do. There appears to be a more firmly articulated awareness from the UniSA second year students of themselves as writers and readers, and as writing students engaged in a learning process, and seeking to understand the dialogic processes of reading and writing. return to text

15. To this list Brady and Krauth add that a discipline also comprises 'academic and scholarly journals dedicated to publishing research from that knowledge'; and 'professional bodies to which its members belong' (2006: 14). [return to text](#)
16. He cites Hazel Smith (*The Writing Experiment* 2005) and Marcelle Freiman (2005) as writing scholars who have discussed the crucial links between writing and reading, between teaching literature and writing. [return to text](#)
17. Dawson lists pedagogical strategies for writing and reading which support the integrated learning practices for reading and writing (2006: 28). [return to text](#)
18. Several essays in Krauth and Brady (2006) offer useful commentary on this issue. [return to text](#)
19. Lanham comments that the 'new expressive space' will have a dramatic impact on departmental and disciplinary structures: 'The "How" of academic teaching and inquiry has indeed changed ... that the awareness of the "What" has changed far more fundamentally has scarcely risen above the horizon' (2006: 248). [return to text](#)

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