

University of South Australia

Claire Woods***Review, Reflection and Redirection in a Writing Program*****Abstract**

With this paper I want to open a discussion about the nature of undergraduate writing programs. In particular as tertiary institutions make claims for relevance and development of graduate qualities in an undergraduate education, we can examine the role and place of writing programs. How should they be framed? What should they offer students? What emphases are important? I describe the development of an undergraduate award in Professional Writing and Communication. I will consider the original design and then the evolution of the award over five years. The theoretical assumptions underpinning the award are described.

Revisions have been made to the award as teaching staff have responded to student needs and to perceived changes in workplace and professional environments. By describing the award, I hope by implication to illuminate and thus raise issues that seem central to the role and place of writing awards in the Australian context.

In the preface to his book *Places of Memory*, an exploration of the relationship between 'whiteman's schools and Native American communities', ethnographer Alan Peshkin writes:

Long before I wrote this book's final chapter, I realized that I have never ceased to be impressed and influenced by Cheikh Hamidou Kane's remarkable novel, *Ambiguous Adventure* (1972), a story of remaining and becoming set in Islamic West Africa. It belongs in the special class of fiction writing that substantiates that some of the best, most faithful rendering of human affairs comes from gifted novelists, the models for many of us who think of ourselves as social scientists.'(1997, pxiii)

The topic and context of Kane's novel is clearly relevant to Peshkin's own work - a study of schooling in four contexts involving Indian, Hispano, Mexican and Anglo students and communities. He explores 'interactions between cultural remaining as reflected in the students traditions of home and community, and cultural becoming, as encouraged by the students' experiences in schools that historically have been established as agents of Anglo-American society' (p xi). Adopting Kane's words, he concludes that '... for them schools are an ambiguous adventure' (pxiii).

There are two points I wish to pick up from what Peshkin says; these are immediately relevant to my discussion of what we attempt to provide in the teaching and learning environment of the University of South Australia's BA (Professional Writing and Communication). First, we are interested (although in a different way from that described by Peshkin for the participants in his studies) with our students and 'their cultural remainings', and their 'cultural becomings'. What we ask them to undertake as they read, write, speak, present and perform within the curriculum of the BA should involve them in an exploration in words of themselves and their world. However, and this is central to our endeavour, we want to engage them in a 'critical' exploration of their own and of others' 'cultural remainings' and 'cultural becomings'. We hope also that we can make our intentions explicit so that no matter what the student's background we provide a context for education in which ambiguity is acknowledged and open for resolution.

The second point I want to draw from Peshkin is the link he makes between the art and craft of the fiction writer and the social scientist in 'rendering human affairs'. The notion of 'rendering of human affairs' I find intriguing, whether one considers the writing of poetry, of TV scripts, of fiction or of non-fiction (e.g. the belletristic essay, the travel commentary), of technical and business documents, or of press releases and assorted professional and community reports. Writers 'render human affairs' in the widest sense - the affairs of life, of the heart, of the mind, or of daily existence.

Student writers have much to learn as they stretch their intellectual and linguistic resources and skills in order 'to render' their involvement in the world. This means rendering their 'cultural remainings and becomings' while developing a critical understanding of the lives of others and of the social and cultural structuring which constrains

and constitutes 'human affairs'. How does the BA (Professional Writing and Communication) and the University of South Australia do this?

First, some history. In 1993, at the University of South Australia, we had the opportunity to develop a new Bachelor of Arts degree. Development of new awards is usually the result of economic necessity in the competitive academic market and this was certainly part of the motivation for establishing the new degree. However, the staff who came together to develop the award drew on their scholarly and working backgrounds, academic experience and commitment, to offer an undergraduate writing award in South Australia where none had previously existed.

This was not an award manufactured just for the economic moment. Rather, the economic moment gave the staff the freedom to create a teaching and learning experience which was in some ways the stuff of dreams. Here was a chance to create a new award in which staff could work without the constraints of traditional disciplines. At the same time, they could take advantage of the potential offered by an interdisciplinary approach as well the possibilities of drawing on a wide range of perspectives to establish a focused and thoroughly theorised program. Because members of the teaching team adopted a deliberately reflective approach to their pedagogy, the program, which had begun with a theoretical coherence on paper, has inevitably changed and evolved as the team put the award into practice, but has remained essentially true to its underpinnings.

The first students entered the program in 1994. Five years later in 1998, the course has been formally reviewed and set on the track for a future which we hope more than meets student needs as well as the economic imperatives of the tertiary education market. Yet, the course has been constantly under review with the teaching team members reflecting on their work, taking advice from student evaluations, listening to employers and adjusting curriculum in response to changes in scholarly thinking and research. Thus, when the time for the formal review came, the team took the opportunity to re-shape and indeed confirm the evolving program.

The course review had also to take into account the requirement that the award reflect the University's commitment to specified Graduate Qualities introduced as essential objectives in University awards. The team had also become particularly aware of the need to enable students to understand the study pathways possible in the award. We wanted to enable them see the award as a stepping stone into a wide range of occupations which value and expect skills in writing and dealing with texts and documentation of all kinds. Employer seminars held each year, when students, staff and members of employing organisations meet to discuss subjects, student projects, skills and workplace possibilities, continue to affirm the appropriateness of the course.

The teaching team would say that the framework for the degree and the sequence of study 'make sense' in that they have a thoroughly articulated theoretical underpinning and pedagogical process and practice which create a coherent BA in Professional Writing and Communication. In describing the award, I hope to suggest how we at the University of South Australia answer the questions I have posed in relation to claims for relevance and appropriate outcomes in an undergraduate education: what is the role and place of writing programs? How should they be framed? What should they offer students? What emphases are important?

The BA is not a conventional 'creative writing' degree. Nor is it a degree in journalism. It does not offer a traditional English Lit program - the university does not have such a department or award. Rather, the BA sits alongside the BA (Communication Studies) and the BA (Multimedia). Students majoring in Professional Writing and Communication may take sub-majors and cognate studies in these areas. The award must serve as a general undergraduate Arts degree but with a focus on Professional Writing and Communication.

The writing program fits into the University's BA award as an 8 subject major with subjects taken over three years. By using options within the major and by using cognate studies or electives, students can build pathways in language studies, technical writing, editing, publishing and document design (including electronic publishing), as well as in scriptwriting and in writing fiction, poetry and creative non-fiction. By using cognate and elective studies students can take up to 14 subjects (out of 24 in the award) within the writing program.

Far from offering them a narrow focus, the very nature of the Professional Writing major provides a range of studies in language, textual, writing and rhetorical studies. Effectively students are engaged in a program which involves them in an integrated and sequenced program in 'the arts of discourse in context'. This definition of rhetoric (Andrews 1992) takes into account a socio-cultural and critical perspective on discourse and texts. In this sense 'rhetoric' can be seen as a synthesising discipline for much of the work in the award.

However, in addition, the sequence of subjects is underpinned by theoretical framing offered by the ethnography of communication and by ethnography as a perspective in research. In particular the understandings generated by the interplay between the researcher/ethnographer/ writer and the text, fit easily alongside the rhetorical perspective. The ethnographer him or herself is the tool for research. The ethnographer's main strategy is as a participant-observer in the context being studied. The ethnographer's task is to represent the situation - the language and discourse, the spaces, the participants, the events, the artefacts, the activities and so on - and provide a credible account. As Van Maanen says the ethnographer tells a 'tale': to decide what that tale is and how it is written is the ethnographer/writer/researcher's task (Van Maanen 1988).

The 'rhetorical turn' - the issue of representation in writing research - has been a significant focus of debate and practice in ethnographic research in the past 10 to 15 years. How the ethnographer 'renders human affairs' and represents the world (the scene, the event, the players) and persuades the reader or audience of the veracity of the portrayal, raise issues of language and discourse, style and structure. The craft of research and of the art writing research are thus foregrounded. To this are added the theoretical perspectives offered by critical ethnography. How the writer or ethnographer represents him or herself, others and their cultures and contexts raises the critical issues of ideology and of social and cultural framing (for example Clifford and Marcus, 1986; Geertz, 1988; Denzin, 1994; Van Maanen, 1995; Richardson, 1995; Wolcott, 1995; Ely, Vinz, Anzul and Downing, 1997).

The BA (Professional Writing and Communication) focuses on these issues. It engages students in a program where the discursive construction of knowledge (within disciplines, situations and contexts) is examined. It also requires students be engaged with language itself as an object of study while at the same time learning how to 'see through language' (Carter and Nash, 1995) in order to understand texts and contexts of all kinds.

Students are invited to understand that the writer is an ethnographer, the ethnographer is a writer; that one is always an ethnographer of one's own situation; that language constructs and is constructed in context; that in this sense, the ethnographic enterprise is rhetorical. They come to understand that the rhetorical and ethnographic perspective we have adopted derives from a critical and interdisciplinary scholarship. Ours is a creative-critical approach to writing, reading and the production of texts.

To explicate the framework for the BA (Professional Writing and Communication) would take more space than is available in this article. So here I offer notes under five headings: an ethnographic perspective; a rhetorical perspective; literacies in context; discourse and the construction of knowledge; and language studies. These notes should be seen as the signposts which guide a complex interdisciplinary approach to the sequence of studies and also the theoretical framing of each subject within the award.

An ethnographic perspective

- a perspective grounded in the ethnography of communication and in sociolinguistics;
- participant observation - being the active researcher; seeking not only the surface but also the tacit meanings in a situation or context;
- a reflexive and critical approach to writing and research; questioning the data; seeking the categories/patterns of language, discourse, activities, actions and events;
- the issues of representation; finding ways to describe, analyse, make decisions about what counts in representing situations, data, contexts etc.

A rhetorical perspective: engaging in the arts of discourse in context

- the *techné* (the art and craft of making) of writing;
- texts and textual practices; being the writer, being the reader (also includes being the viewer and user of interactive texts) - understanding and attending to the visual rhetoric of the printed and screen text (computer/hypertext etc),
- exploration of the interactivity of the text; being in one sense the ethnographer of the text. What decisions are made in the writing? What is omitted? What included? What is foregrounded? What made peripheral? How is the case made, the position, the phenomenon argued, presented and so on?
- the interface between language and literature/text; a creative-critical approach to texts; seeing through the language of the text;
- Work may involve rewriting or textual intervention (Pope, 1995) as a way of understanding text but also as a way of generating texts.

Literacies in context: a critical perspective

- encountering and investigating texts and contexts, reading and writing practices;
- investigating literacies at work and understanding the plurality of literacies in different social and cultural contexts;
- analysing and interpreting texts in context - contexts of communication/rhetorical contexts for writers and readers;
- focusing on texts and users in contexts: Who reads? Who writes? What place does the text (of whatever kind) have in the particular culture or social context. What are the rhetorical demands of context?

- investigating (via projects and practicums) writing and text production in community and working contexts, including the practices of document design and development and the impact of technologies on communication.

Discourse and the construction of knowledge: a perspective on disciplinary knowledge

- thinking about the making of knowledge and exploring the discourses of disciplines;
- being the ethnographer of the discipline and thus not taking what is presented for granted but seeking to examine how the information in history, biology etc is presented;
- examining the discourse - not simply reading the genre (of the discipline) as formulaic.

Language studies: a perspective on language structure and language in use

- assuming a fascination with language and the ways people use it and with the dynamics of language change and use;
- acknowledging the interface between language and literacy - speech and writing;
- exploring language in situation - language and communication in social and cultural contexts (the ethnography of communication);
- understanding the English language and being aware of languages around the world, including English as a global language;
- understanding the cultural politics of language and the relationship between language, discourse and ideology.

From the first class, our students are engaged as writers with what we hope is a deliberately questioning researcher rhetorician's attitude to their work. The first subject, a writing workshop, *Writing and Reading Across the Disciplines*, introduces students to the framing of the course. They undertake the preliminary participant observer piece mentioned earlier. Later they write more substantial piece based on participant observation in an unfamiliar context or situation.

They write and read across a wide range of texts, newspapers, journals, poetry, fiction, disciplinary texts and so on. They maintain a writer's/reader's journal and write creative pieces as well as more specifically instrumental texts. Work in draft is presented for workshop discussion, then it is submitted to an editor for surface editing (using standard editorial annotation). Finally, each piece is presented to the lecturer for response and guiding comment. Students present their work in a folio for final assessment.

The subjects in the degree are designed so that the issues listed above are revisited and elaborated upon. In each subject they 'render' their experience: they are invited to see the art and craft of rendering 'everyday life' - so that skills and art are not seen as discrete and separate. Students are invited to take a creative-critical approach to their reading and so that they can understand how other writers inscribe the world. We have them read fiction, poetry, ethnography, formal research reports and articles, textbook materials, newspaper articles, editorials, essays and commentaries. Among the wealth of texts offered to them as reader/writers - writer/readers, they are introduced to ethnographers writing like novelists and novelists writing like ethnographers.

I have alluded above to *techne* as a way of asserting the links between the art, craft and skills of writing. Certainly in adopting rhetoric - 'the arts of discourse' - as a framing idea, the teaching team in Professional Writing and Communication adumbrated in practice the notion of involving our students in a sequence of study which allows them to develop their skills. At the same time, their creativity is engaged in a producing a wide range of texts including reports, ethnographic pieces, poems, scripts, short stories, longer fiction, non-fiction, and public documents used in professional and community contexts.

Having previously referred to our work within the degree as an exercise in *techne*, I found myself in agreement with the position taken by Ralph Cintron in his recent book *Angels' Town - Chero ways, Gang Life and Rhetorics of the Everyday* (1997). Cintron comments that 'For Aristotle *techne*, 'art' and 'craft' was associated with 'a reasoned habit of mind in making something'. He continues: 'For Aristotle, *techne* was associated with ability, capacity, and skill. Most significantly, art "as a reasoned capacity to make something" was concerned with that something's coming-into being'; hence, art was 'not the product of artistic skill but the skill itself' (Cintron, 1997, xi).

Cintron adopts the notion of *techne* in order to assert the 'every day-ness' of art and creative activity; rather than assuming a split between 'art' and 'skills' whereby 'art' is fetishised and seen as 'art as high art, or art as fiction'. He wishes to reassert the integral relationship between art and skills in the process of making: 'I am using the notion of *techne* here to level that fetishization and to see the art in mundane skills, and more significantly, in day-to-day life' (xii). His conclusion on this matter accords with a position I hold as appropriate for the pedagogy, theory and practice of the BA (Professional Writing and Communication). It certainly fits with our concerns to have students understand from their first class what it means to be a writer as a researcher/ethnographer/participant observer. Cintron asserts:

Why not, instead level the concept of high art and recover another sort of art, one that is not dressed in prestige but that names, nevertheless, an intrinsic aesthetic or crafting that underlies the practices of everyday life, including the making of research. Call it *techne*, "a reasoned habit of mind in making something"(xii).

We ask student writers to engage in the *techne* of writing. We ask them to 'render human affairs' as Peshkin says. Wolcott commenting on writing research and amplifying a phrase by Geertz (who says that the goal of the researcher is 'first to grasp and then to render'), writes:

Rendering is a particularly appropriate word choice, since it implicates a broad range of activities. In addition to writing academic reports, articles and monographs, or making lecture and seminar presentations, one can render through slide, film, and video presentations; storytelling; photography and museum exhibits; stories and poems; ethnographic fiction; accounts prepared for newspapers and popular journals; maybe even an appearance on a TV talk show. (Wolcott, 1995 p198)

All of the above and more are possible in the BA (Professional Writing and Communication). When, as their first assignment, students go to Writers' Week at the biennial Adelaide Festival or an equivalent event in alternate years, they are given the task of being a 'participant observer/researcher/writer'. They must enter a context, be engaged as members of the audience in the Writers' Week tents (participant) and they must record with field notes what it means to be part of the crowd in that particular context - they must observe closely and record in detail (observer). They must then decide how to inscribe that experience; that is, how to render it for the reader. This is a task for the ethnographer as writer and, although we make no claims about this as an exercise in doing ethnographic research, we want to engage students in a preliminary understanding of the rhetoric of research and in the 'arts of discourse'. This is *techne* in practice. This is the writer's *metier*.

My intention in describing the BA (Professional Writing and Communication) is to invite reflection on the enterprise of teaching writing in Australian universities. How is the territory to be described? What does it involve? Creative writing, professional communication, editing and publishing, document design and development, electronic publishing, technical writing/communication, public relations and writing for the media? What are the intersections with other territories/disciplines? For example, what is the relationship between the field of writing and professional communication? Has either of these areas been adequately defined within the Australian context as an area of scholarly activity?

A recent issue of the Australian Journal of Communication (vol 52(2) 1998) was devoted to a discussion of 'professional communication'. Articles in the journal sought to define the territory and suggest the parameters for describing 'professional communication' as an area of scholarship and activity. Authors of several articles included in their definition of 'professional communication' a range of the areas which are the province of writing teachers, e.g. professional writing, technical writing, writing for the media. It is clear that many writing teachers teach aspects of 'professional communication' although they may not consider that this is their domain.

And what of creative writing and those who profess to teach it? Some would argue that all writing is creative and thus that to teach technical and scientific writing, non-fiction writing, or business writing (for example) is to assume that there is a creative aspect to the rhetorical endeavour. Novelist, A.S. Byatt in a recent interview (*The Independent International* 11-17 November, 1998) was reported as stating:

I have never ever allowed anyone to use the word 'creative' about anything I do. I have never talked about 'creative writing'. I use the metaphor we began with, which is work. Work is understanding, work is representing, work is making an object which allows you to consider - as in a microscope - the world from a different angle (1998, my emphasis).

Here then are some issues for teachers of writing in the Australian context. What is the domain of writing? How does it fit and intersect with related disciplines? What might an award in writing involve? What experiences and outcomes might students expect? Prompted by Byatt's statement I suggest we ask questions such as these: what is the work of the writer? How do teachers of writing engage students in that work? What and how might an award in writing contribute to students' understanding of the writer's work, that is, the writer's *metier*?

To understand, represent and consider the world from a different angle is what we intend that students in the BA (Professional Writing and Communication) at the University of South Australia might do. To them we say, 'as writers you are responsible for telling the story. Your work is to render the event, the activity, the people, or the ideas for the reader. Yours is the creativity; yours is the professional application of a writer's skill'.

Let me conclude by quoting Stephen Muecke in *No Road (bitumen all the way)* (Muecke, 1997) as he poses the question every writer ponders no matter what the situation; that is, how to 'carry the story'? The intention with the BA (Professional Writing and Communication) is that students will be confident in answering the question for themselves in their own practice as writers. Muecke writes:

There is a grey rain falling as I leave the cinema and hail a taxi in George Street. Time to go home, to start again, perhaps. We have the elements of a story to be told. There are these two blokes sitting in the sun outside their house. There is a track heading into town. But what language can I use to carry this story? (p. 15)

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Notes and debate generated from this article

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