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Paul Dawson***Writing Programmes in Australian Universities: Creative Art or Literary Research?*****Abstract:**

In this paper I would like to discuss the discipline of Creative Writing in relation to current debates about research in the university system. The term research, as we know, has traditionally referred to the scientific method of systematic and objective investigation into a delimited field of inquiry in order to establish verifiable facts against which hypotheses can be tested and problems solved.

In recent years, and especially since the Dawkins reforms, the concept of university research in Australia has expanded beyond the curiosity-based quest for knowledge embodied in the scientific method. Government pressure for closer links between universities and industry, and the desire for greater economic return for public funding, have seen a shift in support from basic research to applied research. While it is theoretically difficult to neatly segregate the two categories of research, it is clear that changing funding patterns reflect an ideological approval of revenue-raising, publicly beneficial projects. ⁽¹⁾

It has long been considered that this disadvantages the humanities because it is difficult to quantify the benefits of a liberal education, especially in economic terms. Nonetheless, due to their development of scholarly practices, there is a tradition of research and research funding in the humanities. In Creative Writing, which is seen as a literary apprenticeship devoted to artistic practice, there is not.

For teachers of writing, academic promotion is hindered by the failure of the Research Quantum to award points to literary works. Project grants from the Australian Research Council are also difficult to attain, due to its assumption that while "creative" projects are worthy, they do not constitute research (Gillies 263). This is an irksome situation for teachers because a postgraduate student can now write a novel and be awarded a research degree in Creative Writing. So how has this been reconciled with traditional concepts of postgraduate research?

As employment opportunities in academia dwindle, and ideological and policy pressure on universities to provide vocational training continues, we have seen the recent development of doctoral degrees geared towards professional skills acquisition, maintenance and upgrading, rather than 'disinterested' study. These professional doctorates initially developed in the field of education and generally incorporate substantial coursework components while still being classified as research degrees. The underlying assumption is that they focus on the practical application of research skills and theoretical knowledge to relevant professional fields. ⁽²⁾

Another recent alternative to the traditional PhD is the Doctor of Creative Art, which substitutes a work of art for a written thesis. This is also considered a professional doctorate because it provides training for arts practitioners wishing to contribute to the culture industries, rather than research training for an academic discipline. ⁽³⁾

In describing the relationship between professional doctorates and traditional PhDs, Jenny Stephens writes: "'Equal but different' might encapsulate the optimal situation." ⁽¹⁾ So if teachers of writing are hired because of their professional standing in the literary community it can be argued, and indeed is argued, that their work occupies a similar relationship with academic research.

Now I have no pretensions of, or interest in, formulating policy guidelines. I want to look at how work produced in the discipline of Creative Writing might be considered research. But my aim is to situate this work within a particular intellectual enterprise; not as a praxis informed by a disciplinary base, but as an active element of literary and cultural studies.

There are three ways in which the term research is defined and used in the university. The first is research as the preliminary gathering of material; through libraries and archives, interviews, lab tests, empirical observation, statistical and data collection, etc. This is the most common understanding of the term. Now of course this sort of research is carried out by writers. We can all recognise a well-researched book, or a critically informed book.

The problem here, of course, is that this sort of research is not presented in the same way as scientific discoveries, or even the scholarly literary review. It is not verifiable by reference to sources because the material is put to fictive rather than scholarly ends. It is not an appeal to fact, but a selective aesthetic deployment of fact. Nonetheless, there are ways in which the final product not only uses, but actively interrogates and therefore bears back upon the initial research. I'll return to this in a moment.

The second way of approaching research is to see it as an investigatory practice, a specific mental process rather than the physical collation of material. One result of the debate between art and science (C.P. Snow's "two cultures"), and explorations of creativity undertaken by psychology and educational theory, has been the attempt in the latter part of the century to show that science also involves imagination and subjectivity. That, while the results of scientific discovery are written up in a logical manner in scholarly articles, the research process is messy, subject to chance, and governed by the workings of the unconscious mind. ⁽⁴⁾

In arguing for their institutional validity, schools of visual and performing arts have pointed out that funding bodies such as DEETYA and the ARC define research as a dynamic, original, and even creative activity in any discipline - except the arts.

In response to the lack of funding categories for artistic products the Creative Arts have put forward the concept of research equivalence which has operated in American universities since the eighties. This involves making a distinction between research about the arts, that is, say, writing a scholarly article about painting, and research in the arts, the practice of painting itself, to argue that the process of creating an artwork is as intellectually rigorous as any other form of scholarly pursuit.⁽⁵⁾

In other words, while the outcome of research in the arts may be different to accepted forms of research, the process of investigation is not. This, I suspect, is because art and the making of art is associated with pleasure, and in order for artistic practice to be conceived as research, the idea of labour, of work, must be invoked.

Creative Writing certainly conceives of writing as a rigorous, investigatory process. As T.S. Eliot said, "Probably, indeed, the larger part of the labour of an author in composing his work is critical labour; the labour of sifting, combining, constructing, expunging, correcting, testing; this frightful toil is as much critical as creative...we do not assume that because works have been composed without apparent critical labour, no critical labour has been done." (Eliot 18-19)

In this modernist repudiation of romantic concepts of emotional outpouring, Eliot is claiming that the practice of editing and revision is an act of criticism upon one's own work. This view is certainly consonant with the practices of the writing workshop, which has more in common with the Grub street journalist than the unacknowledged legislator of the world.

Now because literary texts came under the now defunct category of Creative Works in the Composite Index of the Research Quantum, Creative Writing is in the same situation as the arts. Nigel Krauth and Tess Brady have pushed an awareness of this situation in *TEXT*, making it clear that the journal's existence is part of a project geared towards gaining full recognition for Creative Writing from the university system and research funding bodies. Literary works, they argued in *Australian Book Review*, "are the products of a demanding process" which "involves intellect-, research-, observation-, recording- and knowledge-related skills, equivalent to those demanded by normal research practice." (Krauth & Brady 47)

There are obviously commonalities between literature and the fine arts. Most attempts to legitimise the teaching of writing in fact rely upon comparisons with the arts; no-one expects art schools to produce Picasso, or music schools to produce Mozart, so why should Creative Writing be perceived as a waste of time if it does not produce Shakespeare?

This relationship, however, is rather more analogous than it is fraternal; existing in history as a metaphorical elucidation of some principle of literary criticism rather than to establish a natural affinity. The category of Fine Arts has its origins in the Renaissance where the various arts ceased to be discussed in terms of the techniques unique to each practice and came to be grouped together in a unified category. The metaphorical comparison which Horace made between poetry and painting was established as a natural law so that the two came to be considered sister arts. The authority of Aristotle was invoked to classify and define all the arts under the unifying principle of imitation. ⁽⁶⁾

The semantic change from Fine Arts to Creative Arts is a result of aesthetics shifting its philosophical interest in art as beauty and mimesis to the nature of artistic expression and the concept of original genius. Artistic works became distinguished by the process of their making. Research equivalence appeals to original work which is investigatory rather than inspired, but still emphasises the process of art as its defining principle.

The visual and performing arts rely on physical manipulation of instruments, materials and bodies for creative expression, and hence the product is ontologically different to scholarly research about the arts. This is why the Creative Arts reject the primacy of the written word when it comes to defining what constitutes a publication. It is

argued that performances and exhibitions need to be accepted as forms of publication, for they are the final products of the artistic process, the public presentation for peer review of research in the arts.

Not only does the process of writing employ the same instrument as a scholarly composition, the pen or word-processor, it operates in the same medium as that which is used to critique it: language. Hence the difference between research in and research about writing is more difficult to sustain at the level of product. An essay about a painting can never be a painting. Yet it has been argued on many occasions that an essay about literature or even literary theory can be literature.

To argue in favour of research equivalence would seem to resort to old distinctions between first order primary texts and second order critical commentary. Considering that many writing programmes encourage works of a hybrid or cross-generic nature which challenge this distinction, this argument would seem to be counterproductive.

It is here that I refer to the most important understanding of research. For examiners do not reward a thesis according to the degree of labour invested in its production, because a student agonised in a Flaubertian manner for days over a single word, or conducted exhaustive research into glass manufacturing to establish narrative verisimilitude, or typed upside down in a belfry. One cannot deduce from a literary work just how rigorous the process was. A degree is conferred because the thesis itself, not the research process, is deemed to have made an original or genuine contribution to knowledge.

So how is a novel or a play or a collection of poems a contribution to knowledge? What needs to be established first is a disciplinary base. In the recent review of the humanities commissioned by the Australian Research Council, *Knowing Ourselves and Others*, surveys of twenty-seven disciplines are provided. In the last chapter, entitled "The Arts", Malcolm Gillies says that while Creative Writing is part of this broad category, he excludes it from his survey because it is dealt with elsewhere in the review. In fact we find a single paragraph in the review of English, which does little more than point out the tension between praxis and theory which Creative Writing provides.

According to Krauth and Brady, "The reading of literature (ie. text reception, the traditional business of English Departments) has full status; but the making of literature (i.e. text production, the business of new Creative Arts and Writing Departments) has yet to establish its niche in spite of swelling student numbers and increased research activity." (*TEXT* Vol1 No 2). It is obvious here that Creative Writing is being pitted against English (or, more precisely, Englishness) rather than being positioned within it.

It is generally considered that, like schools of visual and performing arts, practice-based Creative Writing programmes were brought into the university sector by the Dawkins reforms, hence clashing with traditional concepts of research.

If the distinctions between research and practical teaching were difficult to maintain in the old binary system, then the introduction of Creative Writing to universities cannot be so simple a case as the academy taking on a charter to produce writers through amalgamation with vocationally oriented courses. In much the same way that English began as a 'practical' subject, as an aid to teaching Latin in grammar schools and as a substitute for classics in Dissenting Academies for those who would not need a classical education, so Creative Writing developed in these institutions not because they were vocationally oriented but because they were open to non-traditional approaches to literary education.

Apart from the institutional impetus of amalgamation, the loosening of disciplinary boundaries and the subsequent expansion of methodologies enabled by the 'crisis in English studies' no doubt aided the inclusion of Creative Writing within a plurality of approaches to literature. ⁽⁷⁾

The university subject of English has itself never been comfortable with a traditional understanding of research. At certain points in history it has either railed against it or sought the certainties which it promises. When F.R. Leavis attempted to define English research in the sixties he saw the discipline as the "humane centre" of a collocation of specialist departments in the university. He did not attempt to equate work in literary studies with that in scientific disciplines. English was a discipline which developed intelligence and sensibility. Research in this discipline was embodied in the PhD student, honing his or her critical faculties and contributing to the academic community.

Leavis could find no place for Creative Writing in his ideal discipline, finding universities neither qualified nor appropriate for the education of writers. He also questioned the "fashionable idea" that the presence of writers in a university was good for both the academy and literature. In America, however, Creative Writing was first introduced to English studies precisely in response to the problems associated with the term research.

In *Literary Scholarship: Its Aims and Methods*, which serves as a manifesto for the School of Letters established at Iowa State University in 1931, Norman Foerster argued that, because of the "scientific connotations" of the term research, work in literary studies could more fruitfully be described as scholarship. This was not merely a question of semantics. Foerster, along with other New Humanists and New Critics, was arguing for a disciplinary renovation of the subject of English so that literary research could include not only the traditional areas of philology and literary history, but also the discipline of criticism and the art of imaginative writing.

Wilbur Schramm, first director of the Iowa Writers' Workshop, which was formed in 1939, provided a defence for Creative Writing at the postgraduate level in the last chapter of *Literary Scholarship: Its Aims and Methods*. "The discipline we have been describing," he writes, "is comparable both in quality and in severity with the discipline of any other advanced literary study." (190) He compares work in this discipline of Imaginative Writing with the logic required by literary history, the judgement exercised by criticism, and the feeling for words displayed by the linguist. "The graduate student would not find a good play, or novel, or book of verse an easy substitute for the usual thesis or dissertation." (Foerster et al. 190).

Schramm's appeal to the rigours of literary production is not unlike "research equivalence". He also points to the benefits of vocational training. But his most important point is that Creative Writing would provide a means of bringing writers and scholars together in a common endeavour.

This did not eventuate. Despite being housed in departments of English, higher degrees in Creative Writing are conferred as Masters of Fine Arts. Hence the constant opposition and tension with literary studies which is so prevalent in America. According to guidelines for the Associated Writing Programs, first devised in 1979, the aim of Creative Writing in America, including workshops and coursework in form, theory, contemporary writers and traditional literature, is to make students better writers. There is no dialogue because it is not demonstrated how Creative Writing contributes to literary studies.

To view Creative Writing as one of the Fine Arts and section it off in an alternative paradigm such as research equivalence will perpetuate the false binary divide between research and teaching and preclude a genuine engagement with literary criticism and theory.

In the keynote address to last year's *National Symposium on Research in the Performing Arts*, Malcolm Gillies said: "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 27)

The questions which Creative Writing must ask in relation to research funding and postgraduate study, such as what is literature, what is the nature of the creative process, and, most importantly, what is the relationship between the creative and the critical, are foundational questions of English literary criticism.

I am suggesting, then, that policy and curricula debates in relation to Creative Writing as a discipline are best served by demonstrating how work in Creative Writing contributes to literary studies rather than existing as a creative art equally rigorous to the study of literature.

Regardless of whether writing programmes are housed in departments of English, schools of Creative Art, or communications degrees, the specific discourses which form knowledge in the discipline of Creative Writing belong to literary studies. One always writes from within an unconscious or intuitive theory of literature, even if that is a theory of the divine muse or the inner voice. And the work produced will always relate to existing traditions or genres, even, or especially, if it is in violent reaction to them.

The foundational assumption of the workshop is not that writing can be taught, but that the critical skills of evaluation can be employed in the service of one's own writing. It is here that the craft of writing overlaps with, in fact is enabled by, literary criticism.

Formalism, to oversimplify for the sake of argument, is that protean branch of criticism which studies the form of literary works rather than their content. It "aims at a knowledge of the general laws that preside over the birth of each work," (6) to quote Tzvetan Todorov. Creative Writing contributes to this knowledge through its translation of general laws into available conventions and its interrogation of them through literary practice.

In writing workshops set texts are studied for the way they exemplify particular conventions. What constitutes knowledge then, is not the texts themselves, but the generic, structural and narrative elements which can be inferred from them. While in undergraduate workshops this exemplary standard is only something which is aimed at, for postgraduate writing degrees the thesis is expected to attain such a status. Publishable quality does not mean it might be accepted by Allen & Unwin, but that it can sustain the same sort of critical scrutiny deployed in the study of exemplary texts, that it can contribute to knowledge in the same fashion.

This is not an argument for a narrow, craft-based, practical model which neglects the content of literary works. For an understanding of formalist principles, such as plot, structure and point of view, is necessary to establish how a literary work can engage with its subject matter.

A work of literature does not mimetically represent the world or a fictional world. It is constructed out of, and bears the linguistic traces of, discourses which operate within and organise social relations. These discourses are formed in the fictive text by being pressed into tension with a second layer of language governed by the formal conventions of craft.

A literary convention, such as point of view, is also a critical tool of analysis. By exploring and expanding the aesthetic possibilities of composition a literary text interrogates methods of reading. It forces us to read other works in the context it has established. Hence it is not just a primary, aesthetic text which needs to be interpreted before it can have meaning, it is already an active intellectual engagement with literature, literary conventions and the language of society.

At the level of content the fictive work that students produce has the potential for unlimited interdisciplinary exploration and cultural commentary. A novel about sexual harassment, for instance, can not only engage with, but contribute to feminist theory and an understanding of gender relations. But if it has not been written in the context of a formal course of study, with corroborating references and citations, is it valid research?

If we look at what does occur in a formal course of study, I feel the answer should be yes. A work of post-colonial literature, such as Salman Rushdie's *Satanic Verses*, is a contribution to post-colonial studies because this book is used to exemplify theoretical issues, to indicate the very existence of a post-colonial sensibility. And this literature, post-colonial literature, is informed by and interrogates the very ideas which are being investigated and hardened by critical scrutiny into disciplinary knowledge.

This requires a recognition that knowledge in literary studies does not consist of a list of methodological approaches which can be applied to the study of literature, and nor does it reside in a body of canonical works awaiting critical excavation, but that it is formed at the dialogic junction between the two. Knowledge is constituted by the interaction of literature and criticism.

According to Kevin Brophy, there exists within the humanities, "continuing tensions between so-called critical-theoretical writing and creative writing, a tension that might have been defused for some by recent explorations in factional or ficto-critical writing." (Brophy 229) Writing programmes have accommodated this sort of writing far more than theory and literature classes have. It seems to me that this operates less as an opportunity to unshackle creative endeavour from the constraints of traditional literary genres, than it does to both protect the boundaries of the traditional dissertation and shore up the scholarly credibility of the creative thesis.

The suggestion that ficto-criticism may serve as some exemplary dialectical resolution between the poles of writing and criticism operates on the assumption that other genres of writing, specifically realism, are unaware or naive. This does not allow literary works which do not overtly address issues of criticism to be accepted on their own terms.

I'm not denying the existence of cross-generic, hybridized forms of writing which problematize distinctions between the creative and the critical and explore what Derrida called the essential possibility of contamination between these two modes. However if, by definition, ficto-critical works exist as self-reflexive commentaries on the nature of textual contamination, such a project operates in relation only to a particular type of criticism; that collocation of discourses known as theory.

I see ficto-criticism as a move beyond the exhausted possibilities of post-structuralist writing which, rather than negating or rendering obsolete the distinctions it challenges, requires their continued opposition for its aesthetic dynamism and offers yet another mode of writing within a plurality of options available to the writer.

Another way in which the relationship between the creative and the critical is being negotiated in writing programmes is the requirement, in many higher degrees, of a critical essay with a demonstrated relationship to the fictive piece being submitted. This mirrors postgraduate requirements in the Arts, where the work of art is accompanied by a written piece which acts as a record of the artistic process, identifying issues which were explored and outlining the methodologies employed.

The Australian Research Council recently stated that it would not reward research which leads solely to the production of creative work, implying support for this pseudo-scientific model of arts research. Recommendations in favour of the Creative Arts distinguish the research equivalent activity of academics from their professional practice, that is, serious art from commercial hackwork, by the intent to investigate.

The objective of this unfortunately titled exegesis, then, is to demonstrate that the work of art is a result of investigative research, and hence assist the examination process. The speculative nature of evaluation is supposedly overcome by a corroborating statement of intent prepared by the artist, against which the success of the work is to be measured.

Kevin Brophy argues that "the question of redefining notions of academic research has been postponed at this level." (Brophy 218) In the sense that critical essays are often perceived by both academics and students as addenda fulfilling the traditional criteria for research, this may be the case. The requirement that this critical component be somehow linked to the fictive piece, exegetically or otherwise, is a source of consternation for many writing students, who view their work not so much as autonomous objects resistant to interpretation, but as literary products which ought to possess their own integrity as intellectual work without recourse to critical explanation which sets up the interpretative framework for the examiner.

There should be no need to resort to genetic criticism in order to determine a work's suitability for the award of a research degree, for this success is independent of motivation, of preliminary study and of the process of writing it. Literary works are constantly and necessarily evaluated or used for study without the benefit of authorial intent as a measure of validity. The critical tools are in existence for evaluation and this is the role of the examiner as it is of the critic.

The exegesis, I suspect, also acts as an insurance policy in case the artistic process was not rigorous enough, requiring the student to demonstrate critical/theoretical skills by using their own work as an object of analysis.

There is a long tradition of writer-critics, from Ben Jonson to T.S. Eliot, providing a theoretical defence for their literary creations, or a pre-emptive critique of their work. George Watson calls this prefatorial criticism, exemplified by John Dryden, the "father of English criticism" in Dr. Johnson's words. According to Patrick Parrinder the practice of outlining one's literary agenda was not only a part of the neo-classical tradition of following ancient precepts, but also the outcome of the influence of the new scientific model.

This tradition was not just a matter of writers creating the taste by which they were to be enjoyed, however; it was also the formation of an intellectual inquiry alongside their writing, and, as many commentators have pointed out, it is the base from which English literary criticism developed.

To teach Creative Writing it is not enough to be a practitioner; writers must also be critically aware of their craft. They must be able to articulate their approach to writing and provide critical comment on students' work. If higher degrees qualify students to teach rather than become professional writers, it follows they must also possess critical skills. In this sense Creative Writing is not so much an institutionalisation of the writer, but a place for the writer-critic.

The post-structuralist collapse of epistemological and linguistic boundaries between literature and criticism, however, has required a renegotiation of the traditional roles of writer and critic. It is not the presence of a critical component in research degrees which is problematic, but its orientation. It performs a supplementary rather than complementary role. If a demonstration of critical skills is necessary, there is no reason why these skills should be deployed in the service of self-justification.

Here the methodologies of Cultural Studies, which extract literature from a hermeneutic position which Foucault described as a "general envelope for all other discourses" (308) and view it as an institution, would not be out of place in a workshop analysis of the literary establishment. If postgraduate degrees are to provide professional training to writers, then this surely includes not only practical craft skills, but an informed understanding of the arena in which they wish to operate as professionals. Such an examination would not be just a means of educating the writer, but a critical contribution to the field of Cultural Studies.

What the critical component might provide, then, is an opportunity to collapse the figures of writer and critic into a concept of the intellectual who will respect the discursive difference, but not the hermeticism, of varying modes of writing, rather than attempting a polyglot homogenisation under the aegis of postmodernism, and move between these modes, not with a unified subjectivity or theoretical position to express, but with a plurality of subject positions to adopt.

If English studies is founded on the study of literary texts then obviously those texts contribute to what constitutes knowledge in the discipline. English is a dialogic engagement between literature and criticism, not in a hierarchical sense of host and parasite text, first order artistic practice and second order intellectual apprehension, but an ongoing series of interactions between complementary modes of writing. In this case Creative Writing is not necessarily the teaching of writing literature alongside the teaching of writing criticism, but a mode of literary research within the academy.

Paul Dawson is reading for his PhD at Melbourne University

Notes

1. See The Organisation and Funding of Research in Higher Education (1994) Return to article
2. See Evans, Harvey, Healy, Stephens. Return to article
3. Sharon Bell describes the DCA at Wollongong University as "one of the longest standing professional doctoral degrees in Australia." (Bell 109). Return to article
4. Two of the more influential works have been by Koestler and Medawar. Return to article
5. See Gillies, Strand, Stoljar and Throsby. Return to article
6. See Wimsatt and Brooks for an account of this. Return to article
7. This, in fact, is the argument of the review of English provided in *Knowing Ourselves and Others*. Return to article

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Notes and debate generated from this article

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Nike Bourke and Philip Nielsen *The Problem of the Exegesis in Creative Writing Higher Degrees*
 Jeri Kroll *The Role of the Examiner: Scholar, Reviewer, Critic, Judge, Mentor*

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