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Literary communities: writers' practices and networks

Abstract:

This paper discusses a new direction for research on creative writing: exploring the formative contexts within which writers develop, receive recognition and are celebrated, our approach centres on literary networks and activities that characterise well-recognised literary communities. By studying the UNESCO Cities of Literature network, our research aims to identify and analyse key formative experiences for contemporary creative writers, although in this paper we simply refer to one of those cities — Melbourne.

We hypothesise that the notion of a 'community of practice' has potential to be a constructive way to interrogate writers' practices within literary communities to inform arts policy making and university creative writing programs. In this discussion we try to show how our approach promises to deliver a variety of findings, such as showing the practical links between creative writing and literary studies, as well as between creative writing processes and products.

Biographical notes:

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Introduction

This paper discusses a new direction for creative writing research: exploring the formative contexts within which writers develop to improve understandings of how professional knowledge and skills are learned via networks. The fieldwork centres on investigating the practices of creative writers and their networks within well-recognised literary communities. Taking UNESCO Cities of Literature as an example, the research aims to identify and analyse writers' key formative experiences. In this paper, however, we refer to just one of those cities (Melbourne). Our hypothesis is that the notion of a 'community of practice' (Lave & Wenger 1991) might be a constructive way to frame literary communities for the purposes of arts policymaking and creative writing learning. This paper attempts to show how this approach might deliver a variety of findings, such as, showing practical links between creative writing and literary studies, and between writing processes and products.

Firstly, we summarise the policy significance of understanding how writers learn professional knowledge and skills, especially given the relatively short history of creative writing as a formal university discipline. Secondly, we identify gaps in research on the roles of literary networks for the practices of creative writers. Thirdly, we discuss the relevance of the notion of a community of practice for framing the practices of creative writers and other literary developments. Fourthly, we show how literary cities offer cases for study and sketch our interrogative methods.

Policy

A discussion paper released mid-2010 by Peter Shergold (2010: 6, 8, 19), the Macquarie Group Foundation Professor at the Centre for Social Impact (University of New South Wales), highlights that funding to individual writers and other artists fell by one-third over the last 15 years, victim to the trend of channeling government grants into arts organisations. Shergold defines artists as akin to scientists: 'unique individuals with highly specialised skills, knowledge, discipline and talent, who generate new ideas and new ways of understanding the world'. He contrasts the Australian Research Council's one thousand mid-career Future Fellows (2009–2013) who will each receive over half a million dollars for four consecutive years, to the Australia Council's $10,000–$30,000 per annum fellowships awarded each year to a few dozen well-established artists.

Clearly, Australian writers should be better supported to produce literary work but Shergold discusses creative and scientific professions in simple terms of the individual v. the organisation while creative and scientific funding models are both more complex. In fact, university researchers represent a complex network of academic activity and to be eligible for ARC funding a scholar must apply through an institution. In short, Shergold's argument neglects significant questions that might inform alternative analyses and assessments of current funding model options. For creative writers, there is one main question: How do, and how might, individual writers develop by formally and informally organising to share their

skills and knowledge, much as many more traditional researchers, such as scientists, do?

In reviewing research on the practices of creative writers, we identify specific gaps in understandings about how informal activities and networks contribute to developing the skill and knowledge base of professional writers today. We need a new research direction, which explores the formative contexts within which writers develop, receive recognition and are celebrated. This approach might centre on networks and activities that characterise well-recognised literary communities, many of which engage in and provide the environment for producing creative work.

Therefore, for the purposes of this research, our concept of a literary community is richer than simple formal writing organisations, such as state writers centres. Furthermore, we are not so concerned with the breadth of literary 'communities of interest', as with the specific range of literary communities, or activities and relationships within such communities, that function as learning contexts and tools. The focus, then, becomes informal activities and networks such as literary friendships, literary schools, reading and writing groups, mentoring and sharing of industry know-how. Furthermore, we hypothesise that the notion of a 'community of practice' has potential to be a constructive way to examine the functions of literary communities.

Our proposition starts with the observation that writers and educated readers have shared knowledge and skills in informal presentations of works-in-progress, discussion, reflection and critical analysis of literary practices for centuries. Such associations occurred through literary friendships and groups and national and international journal, book and newspaper forums, all of which contributed to concepts of literary communities. Such communities continue, on the one hand, through writers' festivals, writers' professional associations, readers' groups and, on the other hand, in universities, through traditional academic practices, such as workshops and higher degree by research supervision, with Internet and digital technologies expanding both forms of communities of practice. It is significant that literary communities of interest developed so obviously as communities of practice that the idea of a 'community of practice' was inspired by such artistic groups (Wenger 2001: 2339).

This community-of-practice notion is discussed more below. It suffices here to illustrate the significance of communities of practice through a quote from our interview with playwright Sandra Shotlander (4 June 2010):

> I was initially doubtful or sceptical about the effect of 'literary networks' on my writing … However, lesbian and feminist communities have both supported my existence as a playwright in practical ways and in the formation of ideas. Individual mentors, such as Joan Harris—at the National Theatre Drama School—as well as literary and theatre activists, such as Judith Rodriguez, Liz Jones and Therese Radic … have kept me going, as has Women Playwrights International [WPI]— my playwriting family. WPI has had triennial conferences since 1988 and the lasting friendships developed from these "con-fests", and from communication

> between conferences, as well as visiting each other, has encouraged and cemented my growth as a writer. My sanity and development is also linked to deep and lasting friendships and creative partnerships with Melbourne playwrights also involved with WPI.

Literary studies often refer to productive literary friendships, whether they are multi-layered associations, as with the Generation of '68 (mainly poets), or between 'sets' of literary peers, such as writers' productive friendships with John Forbes (Bolton 2002), or Shotlander's writing 'family'. One of our key research methods is to interview writers on their formative experiences in distinct kinds of writers' networks, an area that literary biographies, memoirs and studies more generally reveal are significant in a passing rather than focused way.

The discipline of creative writing

There has been little Australian—or even international—research on how literary communities evolve and function as dynamic learning networks for writers and creative industry clusters, and how arts policies might best support them. However, a study of Australian writers' organisations, journals and festivals (Ommundsen & Jacklin 2008: 12–22) indicates the significance of such networks for sharing literary knowledge and skills and notes that they are undervalued. A Webb and Brien (2006) review of contributions to *TEXT* shows that university creative writing teachers have been preoccupied with establishing an academic discipline. Furthermore, literary policymaking has been relatively neglected compared with other policy research (see, for example, *Australian Policy Online:* <http://www.apo.org.au/>), emanating from ideas and commentaries raised in narrow discussions of arts policies within literary media, organisations and industries or political parties (Gardiner-Garden 2009).

Although tertiary institutions, schools of excellence and training apprenticeships have existed for visual artists, craftspeople, musicians and performers for centuries, writers have a much shorter history of formal support, especially from universities. Australian creative writing programs, and later creative writing doctoral programs, have only emerged in the last few decades. Therefore it is hardly surprising that among eight categories of contemporary Australian artists studied by Throsby and Hollister (2003: Ch. 5), writers were ranked as least likely to have any formal training in their practice and had the highest percentage of artists reporting being 'self-taught'. Webb and Brien (2006) deplore the fact that Australian creative writing learning is so 'under-researched' and 'neglected', stressing that 'there is still very little systematic research attention paid to the contexts within which, and the conditions under which, writers come to write'—a complaint also made about UK cultural research by Oakley (2009).

We suggest that both teaching in university creative writing programs — and the relevant literary studies — and evidence-based policy-making could be improved by a deeper understanding of the pedagogical implications of how vibrant literary hubs of writers, readers and cultural industries and institutions are developed and maintained. Therefore, our research interest focuses on writers' learning practices

and their reliance on wider literary activities epitomised in strong literary communities. Such communities typically include: a critical mass of writers in variety of styles, genres, and forms; publishers, editors, illustrators, literary agents and book reviewers; retail bookshops selling new and second hand books; writers' organisations; university and other creative writing teaching and research institutions; and readers actively and critically supporting literary activities such as festivals and journals, book launches and reviews, reading groups and libraries. Furthermore, many dedicated writers wear several 'hats'—as editors, reviewers and literary entrepreneurs in publishing and distributing literary work.

Networks for learning creative writing

Given that workplaces and networks are significant for all workers, it is curious that scant attention has been paid to the practices of creative writers within literary communities. Oakley (2009: 59) argues for studies of cultural workers in this 'highly under-researched area'. Serious Australian research focuses on quantitative analyses, such as data collected by the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS 2005; 2007; 2009) and associated analysis (Throsby & Hollister 2003), limited, including by not meaningfully defining 'literary' publishing (SGS Economics and Planning 2008: 61–2, 44). Quantitative studies only crudely indicate levels of involvement, the precariousness of the work, and the kinds of opportunities and barriers that writers encounter step by step through their careers (Throsby & Hollister 2003: Ch. 6). They cannot show how writers teach themselves, rely on literary peers and mentors to learn, or balance various day and night jobs more or less successfully with dedicated writing careers. In contrast in-depth qualitative research can offer rich and complex understandings of the daily practices and experiences of productive writers. We suggest that evidence-based policy-making requires such strong qualitative and conceptual analyses and empirical research to guide and monitor policies' supportive and nurturing roles.

Zakaras and Lowell (2008: 95) state that 'the critical role that arts learning plays in supporting the entire cultural sector is insufficiently understood' in the United States. Similar observations are made in Australia, with added tensions because competition for funding thwarts productive collaboration, indicating the need for funds to support soft infrastructure, resource sharing, collaboration and coordination (Ommundsen & Jacklin 2008: 7–8). For instance, Throsby (2008: 17, 20) has called for stronger federal government policy in core creative arts and skills development to support creative cities but comprehensive analyses of how university writing programs function within broader literary communities and literary production on industry training models are absent. For example, the 2002 *Special feature on mentoring* in *TEXT 6 (2)* indicated that policy instruments such as mentoring, industry internships and literary festivals, as well as research about them, are piecemeal.

Communities of practice

Australian university creative writing programs are breaking new ground. Typically, within a suite of pedagogical tools, they have developed learning communities aligned to the notion of 'communities of practice', i.e. situated, experiential and collective learning by practitioners with a shared interest (Lave & Wenger 1991, Wenger 2001). Many creative writing programs have strong informal partnerships and synergies with well-established literary communities, which also perform functions of communities of practice. Our research focus is on understanding how these dynamic interactions benefit established and emerging writers, and the dynamic interrelations between university creative writing programs and their broader literary communities.

Our innovation is to identify the potential of a community-of-practice framework to analyse the dynamic interactions and interdependencies existing between vibrant literary communities and university creative writing programs. A 'community of practice' refers to a group of practitioners who regularly engage in information and skill sharing and collectively reflect on ways they can be more effective and efficient in their daily work (Wenger 2001; Smith 2003/2009). Seemingly unconsciously—there is scant scholarly literature on the topic—many postgraduate creative writing programs have adopted this approach to inducting, nurturing and maintaining students. However, Geller *et al.* (2006: 7–8) are among advocates of creative writing learning in communities of practice in programs outside universities.

We use the term 'communities of practice' as it originated (Lave & Wenger 1991; Li *et al.* 2009), akin to scientific communities that function unconsciously as communities of practice (Klein & Connell 2005), and specifically to interpret learning within literary communities (Storberg-Walker 2008: 559). We distance ourselves from commercial efforts to overly formalise and manage collective learning through communities of practice within firms (Saint-Onge & Wallace 2003). Instead, our approach is to use the framework to record and analyse ways in which the literary communities we study act as special kinds of learning communities for emerging and established writers outside and within academia. We aim to refine the vague and all-encompassing idea of a community of practice for specific application with respect to functions of literary communities, which, of course, also perform commercial roles.

Driving our inquiry is the need to conceptualise how writers learn in dynamic contexts of wider literary communities and university creative writing programs. Therefore, we seek to find out how creative writers have been encouraged and sustained to produce outstanding work, how they have honed their skills, and how wider literary communities function to improve their practice. Our qualitative approach centres on interviews with individuals and focus groups as well as surveys asking well-established writers and outstanding emerging writers about their practices and experiences. Thus, our interview questions aim to identify and define how a range of writers learn writing skills and knowledge, e.g. through stages of artistic careers (Throsby & Hollister 2003).

However, our field research will not test a set hypothesis. We plan to draw on 'grounded theory' (Glasner 1992), coding data collected in interviews, surveys and focus groups in an 'emergent' way. In cyclical stages we will survey and interview in different locations, analyse our findings, and then return to the research field to test emerging hypotheses and to clarify unclear 'findings' and refine our scope. The communities-of-practice framework mainly serves to draw boundaries around, and give content to, our research focus and to demonstrate the utility of conceptual outcomes necessary to further research on learning creative writing skills and the worth of literary communities to writers.

Surveys and interviews will record the extent and kinds of activities, organisations and networks that best supported writers' careers, in order to address these questions:

- To what extent have writers been 'self-taught'? And, what does that mean?

- What kinds of literary networks are most important to writers at different stages in their careers?

- What conditions, networks and markets for their work are most useful for emerging writers?

- To what extent and in what key ways are learning opportunities provided by publishers, editors, literary agents and writers' organisations?

- What do specific literary communities mean to different kinds of writers, e.g. what does it mean to be a 'Melbourne' writer?

Cities of literature

The UNESCO Cities of Literature network offers a useful comparative framework for studying writers' learning experiences in literary communities. Our analysis of ways that literary communities of interest and learning communities interact to achieve sustained and high quality literary work will focus on Melbourne through either a national or an international comparison or, better, both. When applying for UNESCO City of Literature status, Melbourne (Arts Victoria 2008: Ch. 16), Iowa, Norwich (Writers' Centre Norwich 2009) and Dublin drew attention to the key role of literary education. These cities offer outstanding models for studying (and scoping) ways that government, university and international arts, education and urban policies can best support university creative writing learning activities and literary industries (e.g. publishing and bookselling) within dynamic literary communities characterised by notable writers.

We are interested in understanding the ways in which universities initiate or are very active partners in organising literary activities that in turn spawn, maintain or change literary relationships between writers and writers and others supporting the development of writing skills and knowledge. For example, numbers of partnerships and activities have received funding from national and state arts funding bodies, including: the annual Contemporary Australian Fiction Festival at the University of Technology, Sydney; the University of Adelaide Creative

Writing Program's hosting of the Asia-Pacific Writing Partnership and the journal *Wet Ink*; the University of Western Sydney initiatives in establishing Giramondo publishing and the journal *Heat*; and the RMIT Writers-in-Residence program. Such activities offer opportunities for mature creative writers to convey tacit professional knowledge to nascent and emerging writers.

In 2001, 31 per cent of Australian authors lived in Victoria, and 87 per cent of Victorian authors lived in Melbourne (Arts Victoria 2008: 31) indicating the concentration of writers in this literary community. Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS 2007: 13) data indicate that during the last five years over 800,000 Australians (15 years and older) worked in writing and publishing (over a quarter of them in Victoria) and almost 350,000 of them were in paid work. Melbourne is the site of dynamic literary businesses (Davis 2008), rivaled only by Sydney as a hub of Australian publishing activity and with more diverse literary publications than its rival city (SGS Economics and Planning 2008: 3, 13). Formal literary arts organisations in Melbourne include the Wheeler Centre for Writing, Books and Ideas, Arts Victoria, the Victorian Writers Centre, the Melbourne Writers Festival, the National Poetry Centre and the Centre for Youth Literature. Literary activities initiated by key booksellers and publishers include book launches and panel talks. Literary journals, such as *Overland* and *Meanjin*, exist as literary communities in print spawning literary friendships and vital peer associations.

In order to develop frameworks (models and typologies) for appropriately conceptualising and supporting best practices in creative writing learning in formal (university-based) and informal (broader literary community) networks, our research in each literary community and program studied will ask:

- Exactly how do strong formal and informal partnerships, activities and relations between learning communities in university creative writing programs and well-established literary communities benefit established and emerging writers and strengthen communities of practice (and other learning community models) operating in such programs and communities?

- To what extent, and in what ways, do writers' learning practices develop within and rely on networks and joint activities of university programs, literary communities and literary industry clusters?

- For university and policy purposes, what are the most effective and efficient roles of literary industry clusters for writers, literary communities and associated creative writing programs?

The analysis of material collected through surveys, interviews and focus groups conducted with writers, writing teachers and students, and key representatives of wider literary communities seeks to develop:

- typologies of writers' learning experiences, to inform pedagogical strategies and policy tools

- scenarios of writers' careers, in as much as they rely on and offer support to literary communities supported by arts policies and/or learning in university creative writing programs

- dynamic models showing how sharing learning practices increase skills and knowledge can function in formal (university) and informal networks
- holistic conceptual models for translating and applying these insights for arts policymaking, university creative writing pedagogy, and UNESCO Cities of Literature.

Conclusion

Writing is a core creative art, a building block of other arts, providing the medium for their assessment and appreciation. Our research seeks to reveal the productive meaning of literary friendships and collaborations, informal writing groups and formal writers associations. As arts take a formal place in the national curriculum, whole-of-government arts policies and university educators will benefit from fresh insights into creative writing learning and literary communities. Clearly, research on encouraging and maintaining various constructive literary communities for writers is significant for both university creative writing courses and arts policy-making.

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