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Becoming a writer researcher: Exploring the poetic, rhetorical and referential

Abstract:

In the university environment today, students are asked to ‘think as researchers’ early in their student lives. As universities put an emphasis on building the research focus for staff and students, students face a different and often difficult experience as new researchers and writers when they move from school or workplace to tertiary study. For many students there is an experience of being locked out and even marginalised by their lack of understanding of research practices and even more so of the specifics of writing as a researcher. For creative and professional writing students, the sense that they are de-inscribed or removed from the writing process as they concentrate on the idea of the research and the discourse and forms of research writing can be real.

Research is more than the process of designing a project and carrying it out; it is an exercise in ‘writing’—a very particular exercise in representation and thus in knowledge-making. How do student writers think of themselves as researchers? How do they understand research? How might a writing course or program develop specific skills of doing and writing research?

In order to get at this issue and the implications for sustaining a writing program to support students as they take the journey as writer-researchers, as part of a survey of student perceptions and needs in literacy, we asked students in their first year and their third and final years about their understanding and experience of research.¹

In this paper I discuss their responses and in particular focus with reference to the observation assignments of current students, on ways to allow new writer-researchers to understand the representation process as poetic, rhetorical and referential, and one which allows them space to re-inscribe themselves in the process.

Biographical note:

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Writers are researchers. Or, as Donna Lee Brien says:

In the context of creative writing, we know that writers have always engaged in some form of research as an integral component of their creative practices for, in its most simple terms as Hoffman states: ‘the writer has to know a great deal more than he [sic] actually puts into words if what he writes is to ring true’. (Hoffman, 1996: 1) (Brien, 2005)

The core issue for creative writers in the academy is to have their creative endeavour acknowledged as research. This is central to many of the debates that have been exercising writers, artists, and designers as first the RQF and then ERA policies have shaped the research landscape in Australian universities (Brien 2005). Webb and Brien (2006), in a comprehensive review of the issues for building the research capacity of what they described as ‘an under researched discipline’, boldly set forth an agenda for writing academics to be acknowledged not only as researchers for their creative outputs but also for the sort of research into and about the nature of writing and creative practice which might better position the writing discipline in terms of current political, social and economic research policy imperatives. They conclude their lively paper with a rallying statement of intent:

Strategically, this paper is framed with the suggestion that as more writing academics become recognised in conventional terms as researchers, it will become increasingly difficult for some of our cousins in the humanities and related areas to categorise our work (including our creative work) as frivolous, lacking in intellectual rigor or historical perspective, irrelevant and/or trivial. (Webb and Brien, 2006)

Their focus appropriately is on writing academics and postgraduate students in creative writing and not per se on undergraduates, although their discussion certainly is predicated on the work of academics teaching the many students taking writing courses in communications, general arts and humanities, and writing degrees.

This paper is concerned with undergraduate students because it is from this cohort that postgraduate research students in writing, and thus future writing academics, emerge. How are these students inducted into the world of research? How do they think of themselves as writers and researchers? How does their writing activity in their courses fit alongside the more conventional work in other general arts or humanities courses? These questions are particularly pertinent in a climate in the university sector that sees universities reshaping undergraduate education, often with a focus on early introduction to research and to experiential learning—that is, to the sort of activities beyond standard essay and library research assignments. Undergraduate research education, according to Willison and O’Regan, ‘has become an imperative for research-intensive universities’ (2007: 393).

Many Australian universities have, therefore, moved to incorporate an introduction to research practice early in the undergraduate study sequence, aiming to achieve ‘higher levels of student satisfaction and generic skill development’ (Willison and O’Regan, 2007: 393). The most important task for universities is ‘to define in more creative ways what it means to be a research university committed to teaching

undergraduates', stated The Boyer Commission (Boyer 1998, in Willison and O'Regan, 2007: 398).

Undergraduate writing students and research

In the discussions about writing research, there has been little about undergraduate writing students. An important issue, therefore, is how we enable writing students to become aware of themselves as writers *and* as researchers—and thus, not to be labelled as being engaged in 'frivolous or trivial' work (Webb and Brien, 2006).

Students enrol in an undergraduate writing program because they want to write and to stretch their interest in playing with words into a career where words and the imagination play a central role. Few, it seems, think about the range of research they will be required to undertake either in their writing program or in other discipline sub-majors during their undergraduate education.² They acknowledge that they will be required in all their undergraduate courses to write across a range of genres—essays, reports, speeches, articles, narratives, summaries—both critically and creatively.³ They do not link writing and research or perceive these as forming an integrated and iterative process.

Research and writing

Discussions about an appropriate general research course for first year students inevitably tend towards a traditional introduction to research processes and practices: quantitative and qualitative research, ethics, research process—aims, objectives, research questions, methodology, data gathering, analysis, report writing. Willison and O'Regan (2007) present a framework for Research Skill Development (RSD) to enable students to see themselves as active researchers and to activate their curiosity and capacity to create knowledge. The RSD conceptual model suggests a relatively conventional research process which includes a final component that: 'Students communicate knowledge and understanding and the processes used to generate them' (400). There seems to be an implicit separation of research activities and processes from the act of writing or communicating. Indeed what is missing here is the sense that research is writing and writing is research, i.e., that '... all our research activities are rhetorical in nature' (Doheny-Farina, 1993: 254).⁴ Sociologist Laurel Richardson elaborates:

Social Science writing is sociohistorically constructed. The writing uses rhetorical and literary devices to create and sustain values and to convey cognitive content. To ignore the ubiquitousness and power of these practices is perverse and short sighted – not to mention unscientific. (Richardson, 1997: 46)

More recently, Ellingson, captures the consequences of the debates among qualitative researchers (e.g. Clifford and Marcus, 1986; Van Maanen, 1988; Denzin, 1997) about representation and interpretation:

Qualitative methods illuminate both the ordinary within the world of fabulous people and events and also the fabulous elements of ordinary mundane lives.

How we represent the truths we generate remains an open question. The interpretive turn in the social sciences, education, and allied health fields inspired a wide variety of creative forms of representation of qualitative findings, including narratives, poetry, personal essays, performances and mixed genre/multi media texts as alternatives to the hegemony of traditional social scientific research reporting strategies that pervaded the academy (e.g. Denzin, 1997). (Ellingson, 2009: 1)

How closely this might align with the sort of research approaches familiar to writing students or scholars working within the ever moving frames and possibilities of ficto-critical work, is perhaps obvious (see Dawson, 2002; Gibbs, 2005; Raine, 2009). It is in the discipline of writing, broadly defined, that the impetus for attending to the role of writing in the research process might most clearly be demonstrated at a time when universities are seeking to re-design and re-invigorate undergraduate education.

Writing students and research

Undergraduate writers begin the process of working in the writing discipline as a creative research enterprise, while facing the conventional formulations of research processes in other disciplines. They hold particular perceptions and a relatively basic view of research: It is ‘to seek information’; ‘looking up a subject and reading as much as possible about it’; ‘finding out facts and information regarding something we are not sure about’. Students comment on their need ‘to use an academic voice as well as to use correct punctuation, grammar and formatting’; ‘to stay within a style if it is a more analytical piece’; and to put ‘ideas on paper in a logical order’. One first year student reflected, ‘Writing academically is tough for me. My history teacher had an issue with my essays and my writing as “too creative”’. Research for these students means gathering data and then writing about it—with all the problems inherent in juggling ideas, and conforming to the constraints of academic discourse.

Third and final years students indicate a somewhat more sophisticated understanding: ‘to more fully understand a topic as well as to find gaps in research on a given topic’; ‘building a groundwork of understanding about a topic and the various dialogues of theorists around that topic’. They are more explicit about writing requirements, acknowledging ‘the difference between writing an essay compared with writing for a research journal – the differences between different academic styles’. One stated, ‘I think it is important to know all aspects of writing from professional to creative and the techniques and styles involved in such writing’. Many are clear that they now think of themselves with confidence as researchers: ‘In general I see myself as a constant researcher whether for study, children’s homework, purchasing, general decisions’.

First year students see adapting their writing to academic discourses as a process of de-inscribing themselves, their knowledge and their creativity; i.e. as distancing in their effects. Third and fourth year students begin to take control of their writing, particularly as they work their creative pieces alongside critical work—thus re-inscribing themselves and their voice. A third year student perceptively and

confidently observed, ‘You need to understand a topic thoroughly before writing can begin to incorporate your own voice’ (Woods and Skrebels, 2009).

Setting a research and writing assignment: An ethnographic process

A focus on the writer as researcher and research as a writing process, through specifically designed assignments which demand self-reflexivity and exercising a rhetorical imagination, can bring the writing student to a new understanding of what it means to undertake research. Whether one is writing fiction, nonfiction, a report, a travelogue, a magazine piece or a newspaper column, the process of research + writing is core to the *techne* (the creative art of making the text) involved. Thus, in the first year writing course, students undertake assignments (fiction, nonfiction—travel writing, commentary, technical and scientific papers—and poetry) designed to introduce them to a range of genres and the elements of creativity and self-reflexivity in research activity. The intention is to ground the curriculum firmly in a process of research as a rhetorical and social act (Booth, Colomb and Williams, 1995: 5). They become very specifically involved in what Walter Benjamin terms ‘Technik’; that is ‘both the human relations of production (“technique”) and the means of production (“technology”)’ (Roberts, 1982: 158, cited in Skrebels, 2007). The emphasis is on students being producers and performers of texts; as writers and as researchers, they are involved in the art and craft of making, that is, *techne*. (Woods, 2006: 129)

The weekly assignments, which allow for drafts, workshopping and feedback, lead toward the completion of a folio of the revised preliminary pieces and, more significantly, a final research project paper. This is an observation project undertaken from an ethnographic perspective and conducted in a community context. It is premised on the notion that ‘everyone is an ethnographer’ in daily life, but that the researcher adopts processes and procedures that are systematic, ethical and rigorous in conducting a specific piece of in-context research, and will demonstrate a critical self-reflexivity of their research process. Students are asked to provide a reflective commentary on each assignment—a meta-commentary on themselves as readers, writers, researchers and producers of a text. They prepare a brief proposal indicating how they will carry out the mini-ethnographic study as participant observers (being mindful of ethical practice), take field notes, do library research, analyse and interpret their data, and decide how they will present their conclusions to an audience.

Encouraged to be particularly conscious of the issues of representation, students are given the freedom to choose how they will present the data they have gathered from observing and interacting in a community context, e.g. supermarket, bingo hall, football club change-room, college dining hall, ethnic community meeting, charity op-shop. The challenge is ‘rhetorical, poetic and referential’ (D’Angelo, 2007: 89). They must show that they have ‘been there’ (a crucial consideration for the qualitative/ethnographic researcher), and must use data/details both to support their claims and conclusions as well as to illustrate points being made. They must show, too, that they can organise their text, words and images (and multi-modal or multi-genre techniques if they choose), to engage and thus persuade the reader.

What then do students who undertake this sort of research and writing exercise reveal?

Alex, a dedicated AFL fan, in a final paper titled, ‘How to accessorise a Crows guernsey with a chip on your shoulder’, pulls together observations of AFL followers (made over several weeks), into a single afternoon of football. Organising the text chronologically by the quarter-time scores, she takes her reader into the grandstand to sit among the rival fans. She focuses on their discourse—expletives, verbal abuse of the umpire, interactions between rival groups—interspersing the narrative with interpretative comment about the supporters’ rituals.

The piece begins:

XXXX Gold connoisseur, Adelaide support and campaigner for justice ‘Dan’ hurls expletives at an adamant umpire in defence of the questionably high tackle just laid by Crow Scott Thompson. His compatriots agree; wild snarls of “BULLSHIT!” and “GET F***ED UMP!” rip the air apart in alcohol-fuelled rage; the recent lift on the alcohol ban at AAMI Stadium is happily appreciated this afternoon. The quarter time siren blares, and like Pavlov’s dogs the men shuffle obediently to the bar. ...

Judging by the remarks thrown like grenades between the warring factions of the Crows army, the Victorians are safer far far away. Being a match between interstate teams, one would expect the rivalry to range between home side and visitors. But the inner politics of any group is more fascinating than the united front they present to the public; it is where opinions are aired without apology and where rationality is never a requirement.

She allows herself a place in the narrative as fans talk to her, and she keeps the researcher, participant observer role intact. Her reflections provide a sense of how she sees herself as writer and researcher: aware of the rhetorical nature of the exercise and the participant observation process:

... I found the observational process enlightening, as I look at the crowd around me with more discerning eyes and noticed patterns and behaviours I didn’t before. Note taking was difficult to undertake at the game itself; I looked unusual and attracted a few comments and it was difficult to take a lot down so I focussed on quotes mostly as I had my key ideas firmly in mind. After I had decided exactly what it was that I wanted to comment on in my piece I did some research about the history of football in Adelaide to incorporate and help prove the point I was trying to make. I enjoyed writing up my notes and carefully edited it so that there was enough humour, narrative, description, history and context so the reader experienced exactly what I experienced.⁵

Katrina takes a different stance in reporting her study of different types of people in a well-known bookstore. In her study, titled ‘Book Beans’, she deliberately focussed on categorising behaviours and actions, seeking patterns of interaction to characterise the regulars in the bookstore. Adopting the style of a popular magazine feature article, she writes:

‘One short, soy flat white, one equal; two tall caramel lattes, one skinny; a Grande hot chocolate easy on the froth and a chai latte super hot, three sugars. Takeaway.’ The thirty-something in her tight business ensemble whips her PDA out of her pocket and starts spinning the stylus between red manicured nails as she saunters to the pick up counter. The staff raise their eyebrows at each other and smile sarcastically.

...

A coffee store inside a book store - it’s probably been done on a small-scale before but this is no ordinary book store and no ordinary coffee store. When one of the largest retail book stores in Australia aligned itself with one of the country’s most popular coffee franchises they had to know they were on a winner in the economic sense, but they probably didn’t realise the collaboration would spur a whole new sub-culture of café customers.

Jess became more a participant than observer in her the study of members of a lawn bowls club. Unlike Alex or Katrina, she chose a context in which she was a real outsider, but where she needed to establish herself as a trusted observer. She was then invited to participate and this provided further insights as she unpacked the culture of the Seagulls Bowling Club. She uses dialogue and the interactions between the members as they play and chat to her to drive the narrative. Here she describes the first time she tried to bowl:

‘Slowly and carefully’, Ron explains to me. You’d be surprised how heavy the bowls are! I throw the ball and it hits the green with a thud. ‘Okay love, nice try but perhaps you should go and sit down now’, Ron tells me. I received encouraging comments and gestures but notice when I sit down I had dented the green. Instead of angry looks and comments, I was politely asked to take a seat. These people are gentle and friendly and are excited to know that I am interested in what they are doing.

She continues, interpolating interpretive comment within the narrative:

The history of the game is something that is carried closely with every member; it is something that if understood betters the game. ... ‘These are the keen bowlers love, the ones that come out in the winter, the only time they don’t play is if it is raining.’ Ron told me.

...

The bowling club reflects more than lawn bowling, it is a community built of traditions, history and mateship, yet each member is more than willing to include and inform newcomers no matter their age or sex.

Conclusion

These students are embarking on their university studies in writing, working in the way that Brien describes:

There is (or should be) no debate about the fact that writers read a vast array of books and other media texts, observe, eavesdrop, visit places, and utilise all their senses to mine the reality around them to inform their writing. (Brien 2005)

They have carried out a research-focussed writing project that encourages them to engage with the community, and which demands that they stretch the rhetorical, poetic and referential functions of their writing. As novice ethnographers, they write ‘... all the time, and ... in a number of very distinctive and focused ways’ (Jordan, 2001: 43). As they pay attention to the literary and rhetorical devices that are the architecture of the text (Webb, 2006), basic and conventional understandings of research processes begin to be revised. Jordan notes:

It is a juggling act between different types of data, various voices, various styles and types of writing. [Our] student ethnographers are not only preoccupied with the difficulties of representing the other, but with the corollary of this, representing and situating the self. They are, in addition, attempting to situate the emerging text somewhere between what they know about ethnographic writing and what they know about the conventions of other kinds of writing they are more habitually called upon to produce in an academic context. (Jordan, 2001: 44)

Encouraged to see the relationship between analytic and imaginative work, the writing students, as researchers, move from observing and participating to inscribing, thus seeing research as a writerly activity, which brings with it a responsibility to the subject and to themselves. Mike Rose offers a powerful statement with which to conclude this discussion on the nature of research, inquiry and writing:

[T]he themes, *the big passions and the problems of a research and writing life, are not neatly separable*. We keep revisiting the issues that matter to us, in new institutional and social settings, farther along the path of our own development, influenced, one hopes, by experiences and the fresh ideas emerging around us. (Rose, 2006: 8, in Linquist, 2007: 75 (my emphasis, CW))

In the writing discipline, as we teach novice writer-researchers, there is an opportunity to demonstrate a curriculum process that plays to the passions and problems of research and writing, thus to offer a direction that might influence the broader activity of undergraduate research education.

Endnotes

1. The survey was conducted in one class in a compulsory first year course in the undergraduate writing program, the BA (Writing and Creative Communication) and in an upper level course taken by third and fourth year students. The hard copy questionnaire was completed in class and followed by an in-class discussion.

2. We have developed a brief in-class survey of student perceptions and attitudes to academic literacies, writing, reading and research, followed by in-class discussion. This generates student reflection on themselves as writers/readers and researchers and also allows us to track the changing attitudes and concerns of our students.

3. The responses cited are drawn from the in-class surveys conducted in early 2009 in a first year class and a combined upper level class of third and fourth year students.
4. Doheny-Farina addresses the issues of the rhetorical and ethical issues in writing research at a time when in the late 1980s and 1990s the issue of the qualitative researcher as writer and thus a producer of knowledge was a key matter for discussion. Doheny-Farina notes: ‘Some of these critiques point out what an ethnographer writes is not an objective account of what actually happened within a research setting, but instead is a creation, a realistic fiction’ (1993: 253).
5. Alex, Katrina and Jess have given permission for work to be quoted in this paper.

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