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Maintaining Writerly Identity During the Creative PhD

Abstract:

PhD candidates who are creative practitioners move through a series of shifts in identity as they enter into academia. They are not raw, unformed talent, but bring with them skills and experience. In entering into the paradigm of scholarly language and epistomological frameworks, their identity begins to take on a Janus-like quality, facing in two directions. Yet this is not a temporal duality; there is no past and present, but an invitation to partake simultaneously of the writerly world and the academic one. Over the course of the PhD one of the new skills acquired is learning to navigate the demands of both worlds. Writing artefact and exegesis there is a need to integrate these bifurcated identities- to bring together two distinct writerly voices and ontologies within one document that is expressive yet rigorous; a document that speaks from a single location. Unlike other disciplines, which sit comfortably within the academic frame, creative practitioners have a greater distance to travel to reach the place where practice and theory are comfortably integrated. This paper considers the process of integration that needs to occur, and asks the key question, 'what can aid such PhD candidates to maintain their writerly identities as creative scholars?'

Biographical note:

Dr Rachel Le Rossignol is a recent graduate of Swinburne University Technology and now a sessional lecturer with Victoria University. Her doctorate was completed as artefact and exegesis, and considered how creative writing relates to psychological issues around responding to climate change. Rachel's interests include writing and editing, creativity, research and the psychological impacts of being a creative researcher, such as burnout and flow. She also provides academic editing assistance to PhD candidates through her business, Nightingale Writing (Le Rossignol being French for nightingale). Rachel's creative writing projects include Young Adult

fiction, fantasy and scriptwriting. Her play *No Sequel* recently won both the People's Choice Award and the Judge's Award at the Eltham Little Theatre's ten minute play festival.

Introduction

Entering into Doctoral studies in the field of Creative Writing means simultaneously entering into a state of identity bifurcation. A Doctoral candidate is required to be a creative practitioner, an identity which may be familiar to them, yet at the same time they must develop a new identity as an academic. The end product of their study is an artefact and exegesis: that is, a creative document and a theoretical one. Both documents have divergent requirements in terms of content, language and thinking processes. In writing them there is a need to bring two distinct writerly voices and ontologies together in a document that is expressive yet rigorous; a document that speaks from a single location. This requires a candidate to integrate the bifurcated identities, and Finlayson (2012, p. 2) argues that this is what they do, crafting a new, more complex identity during their studies. Although her exploration of the issues around this is comprehensive, her argument focuses primarily on a candidate's emerging scholarly identity. However, the question arises: what happens to a students' identity as a creative practitioner during such a process?

This paper considers this question, first by outlining some issues faced by Doctoral candidates in Creative Writing and the potential impacts of these on writerly identity. The term 'writerly identity' is used in this paper as an abbreviated way of referring to the skills and experience students hold as creative writing practitioners and the ways in which they perceive themselves to be so. The paper concludes by focusing on ways to facilitate a less problematic transition to a new, integrated identity that fully incorporates both the pre-existing practitioner identity and the newly emerging scholarly identity through the student/supervisor relationship and shifts in the broader academic arena. Much of this paper has grown from reviewing the extensive debate found in TEXT Journals relating to students' and academics' experiences of Creative Writing degrees in Australia, as well as discussion with colleagues who have recently completed or are currently undertaking such a degree. Some consideration is also given to the broader literature exploring the relationship between creative practice and research.

Issues Arising for the Doctoral Candidate

Status is Linked with Academic Identity

New Doctoral students are not tabulae rasae, but bring with them a professional tool box of skills, experience and knowledge acquired as creative practitioners (Finlayson, 2012; Kroll & Finlayson, 2012) and via careers which may or may not have been in the creative arena: teaching, journalism, social work, business, acting, policy development or any other field. As creative writers they may hold an extensive skill set, including the personal (empathy, imagination and creativity), the technical (relating to constructing fiction) and the analytical (in terms of reflection through practice and the ability to undertake research) (Hetherington, 2010; Higgs, 2008). However, through privileging academic rigour as the mode of articulating and explaining creative practice (Hetherington, 2010; Gamelin, 2008; Nelson, 2004; Webb, 2012) creative skills acquired prior to study are de-emphasised in favour of the acquisition of new academic researcher skills. Webb expresses this as a zero sum game whereby what is required for one takes away from the success of the other (2012, p. 9), yet this is not always so balanced: given the environment, the academic is likely to win. As a mature learner the PhD student soon discovers that despite this professional tool box, she or he is at the bottom of the academic ladder, or as Kroll and Finlayson express it, their identity capital has shifted from high to low (2012, np). This can manifest in the lack of attention given to their work at conferences, for example through being allocated to present in small rooms, having limited attendees to their papers and academics with evident prestige not attending: all experiences reported to this writer by colleagues.

Students identify that to improve their identity capital they need to undertake the range of activities (such as publication, conference presentations, tutoring) that establish scholarly legitimacy (Finlayson, 2012; Kroll & Finlayson, 2012). Yet in the time poor environment of writing a PhD, there is a simple equation whereby time given to academic pursuits takes them away from creative pursuits. At the same time, when the implicit message is that status derives from academic activities, the inference is that creative activities do not carry prestige. As Webb notes, entering the domain of the creative PhD, with its 'different gatekeepers', students can already become like 'fish out of water', having to adapt to new discourses, tools, audiences, methods and, indeed, a different logic: add to this the sense that artist-academics are perceived by some as 'lightweights' who must work much harder to achieve regard (Webb, 2012, pp.8-9) and the message of lost identity capital is not only made clear, but

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linked to the very skills and experience which may have earned them a place as a Doctoral candidate.

This is further reinforced by university practices that may, albeit unconsciously, suggest that the artefact is of less importance than the exegesis. Despite Neave's (2014) statement (based on research by Scott, 2012) that students undertake Creative PhDs in order to improve their writing skills, the likelihood is that they will be less skilled in academic than creative writing so skill enhancement will focus on the writing of the exegesis. Further, in the experience of this writer and fellow students, student review presentations involved fulfilling a number of academic criteria, with any presentation of the creative work included as an addendum or example only. Finally, there is uncertainty around how to evaluate creative works as research output (Brien, Burr & Webb, 2010; Krauth & Brien, 2012) and, most importantly for students, when examining the artefact:

"…examiners do not seem confident about how to examine the quality of thinking and the contribution to knowledge effected by the creative element of a creative arts doctorate." (Brien, Burr & Webb, 2013, p. 8)

The result can be different levels of feedback: more detailed for academic works, where standards and expectations are clearer and therefore there is a greater level of comfort in providing it (as evidenced in Krauth & Brien, 2012), and less for creative works where assessment has fewer objective criteria. For students this may be a disappointing and even confusing deficiency, especially if the degree numerically places greater emphasis on the artefact (through percentage of total output). This writer received a single sentence as feedback on the artefact from one examiner, a deeply unsatisfying outcome given the work that goes into writing a novel.

The Writing Process and Gaze

The academic environment is essentially a critical environment, where ideas are tested for rigour by being examined closely and challenged. Although some authors argue that creative writers are not as fragile as might be expected (Gandolfo, 2006; Krauth & Brien, 2012), the act of close examination of the creative writing process, or what I will here term gaze, can

have several impacts. Gaze may come from supervisors, through requisite review processes involving faculty academics or through refereed conference presentations, but it might equally become an internalised process for the student through the need for critical reflexive practice.   The consequences may be changing the nature of the artefact, self-doubt (which can hinder creative practice), or, ironically, changing the process of creating the artefact.

Anastasia Gamelin, in her honest reflection on her doctoral journey, notes that writing her dissertation involved significant struggle and questioning as she strove to maintain her authentic voice in the face of academic pressures and isolation (2008, p. 178). Her comment that "in academe you do not create your own life, you must create the one they give you" (Gamelin, 2008, p. 183), which concurs with Webb's statement that new creative scholars must fit academic conventions whilst simultaneously being seen as credible artists (2012, p. 9), perhaps goes to the heart of the reason why one third of academics stated they changed their creative writing when they knew it was being peer reviewed, in a survey by Krauth and Brien (2012, p. 8). In the same survey 9% of academics felt the peer review process impeded their development as a creative writer whilst a further 45% were uncertain of its impact (Krauth & Brien, 2012, p. 10). It is important to note that those surveyed were experienced academics, used to the critical gaze arising from peer review, not Doctoral students who are being exposed to it for the first time, and who may lack the contextual understanding which can create a degree of resilience to such feedback. As Brien, Burr and Webb note:

"negative critical reviews, or rejection by one's peers tends to feel more like instances of personal and general failure than a contextual event, and this can have a negative effect on personal wellbeing" (2013, p. 5)

Self-doubt can detract from a Doctoral candidate's ability to maintain an authentic voice in their creative practice, leading them to change their writing. Neave acknowledges the risk that in reading student texts for how they can be revised the outcome can be a move towards conformity and away from 'liberated creativity' (2014, np).   However, Hetherington argues against the Romantic notion that thinking too analytically can obstruct the creative process, although he does recognize the fragility of the initial creative process (2010, p. 8). On the other hand, Gandolfo challenges the idea of the fragility of the creative imagination as

something which can be killed by intellect (in this case the critical gaze), a myth that she says pervades the creative writing discipline, arguing instead that creative writing grows from 'cultural production and social construction', or the artist's intention derived from the issues they have faced in life (2006, np). This may well be true, but for Doctoral candidates fragility can be a broader reality that arises from isolation, psychological and practical stressors (such as time) and the need to adapt to a new epistemological and ontological mode.

Although Knowles, Promislow & Cole (2008) identify process as a central focus for an arts-informed thesis, this may be more or less the case with a doctoral exegesis in Australia: having spoken with a number of students and read a number of theses, the question of how a creative writer works seems far less important in these documents than reflecting on the literature around the field of creative writing degrees and practice-led research. This can be confusing for a novice researcher who has undertaken the degree to focus on their practice, again de-emphasising their writerly identity at the cost of locating themselves within the academic arena. Another, somewhat ironic, consequence of gaze is that it may actually change a student's creative processes; for example, as a creative writer they may not usually show their text to others until they have edited it several times, but in the Doctoral process they may be required to show their supervisor at a much earlier stage in order to satisfy questions of progress. The impact of this on the development of the text is a question worth considering.

A Bifurcated Identity

> "Creative writers in academia, students as well as staff members, have at a minimum two
> major ways of being in the world: academic and writer." (Kroll & Finlayson, 2012, np).

An issue which has been discussed extensively in the literature is the tension that arises from the meeting of the academic and the creative in the production of a Creative Doctorate. This is an extremely complex issue that can only be briefly touched on in a paper of this length. Creative arts research, when placed within the academic environment, still struggles for acceptance, since it fails to meet the formalistic ideal valued not only within fields such as science but also within social science research (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 149; Polkinghorne, 1988, p. 176). Nelson's evocative idea of the 'schismatic soul' (2004, np) perhaps encapsulates best the way in which creative researchers are placed between two epistemologies; the paradigmatic or logico-scientific, with its emphasis on known truths, logic and reason, and the narrative frame, with its emphasis on descriptions of meaning, and

complexity (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Eisner, 2008; Higgs, 2008; McAdams, 1993; Parry & Doan, 1994; Polkinghorne, 1988). Inevitably this creates tension or dissonance (Higgs, 2008; Mienczakowski & Moore, 2008; Neave, 2014; Nelson, 2004, np).

Creative practitioners embrace hermeneutics in order to create: imagined stories arise from recognizing that others interpret reality differently, and, as Oatley notes, grow from the writers' ability to abstract themselves from reality, 'to conceive states they [have] not directly experienced' in all their uncertainty, emotional depth and ambiguity (2011, p. 30). Creative researchers fit within Polkinghorne's human sciences paradigm in that the knowledge they produce relates to building a greater understanding of human existence rather than finding ways to control it (1988, p. 159). The outcome is not clear knowledge or proof but less defined understandings (Nelson, 2004). Not only the knowledge itself, but the ways in which it is uncovered, can differ greatly in the academic compared to the creative modes. Van Loon articulates the distance between these when she compares the linear assemblage of logical, reasoned research, with its measurement and certainty, with the oscillating, at times directionless movement of creative exploration, which involves restlessness and indeterminacy (2014, np).

Creative researchers have the choice to remain committed to their writerly identity, to adopt a scholarly identity, or to attempt to integrate both. Being a creative artist requires empathy, imagination, compassion and sensitivity (Eisner, 2008; Neilsen, 2008) as well as a willingness to embrace personal emotions and individual ontologies (Chambers et al, 2008). Being an academic requires highly developed critical skills and a considerable amount of resilience. Within the academic environment empathy and sensitivity can therefore be a deficit: as Brien, Burr and Webb note, not every Doctoral candidate is equipped psychologically to undertake the demands of the degree (2013, p. 5). The very characteristics which equip them to be good writers may be the same ones which make it difficult for them to thrive in academia. Even if they have a high degree of resilience to withstand the psychological impact of the tensions, the task of writing artefact and exegesis require highly advanced skills:

"Story writing and critical analysis are indeed separate gifts, like spelling and playing the flute, and the same writer proficient in both is doubly endowed. But even he can't rise and do both at the same time." (Clandinin & Connelly, quoting Welty, 2000, p. 107)

Being a creative scholar requires the researcher to be an expert in their artistic process whilst also being an expert in research methods (Higgs, 2008, p. 548) or, to use other terms, to simultaneously hold both a skills and a knowledge orientation and to hold a dual consciousness, being inside and outside the art (Neave, 2014, np). Webb is optimistic that creative academics can forge a new identity that embraces both skill sets and identities, identifying that both the scholarly and writerly identities have in common a commitment to innovation, a resistence to social norms and a tendency to look awry at the social world (2012, pp. 7-8).

Writerly Identity in Academia

Whilst the paper has so far discussed three issues that can impact on the robustness of writerly identity for Doctoral candidates, it is by no means a complete picture. A survey of years of articles in *TEXT Journal* identifies a significant issue that is discussed vigorously, and that is the very fundamental question of what is considered legitimate research within the academy. This has been exacerbated with the steady growth of the influence of economic rationalist thinking on what is considered acceptable university output (Brien, Burr & Webb, 2010; Gibson, 2010), thinking that Doctoral candidates cannot fail to be aware of, particularly when there is pressure to complete in a timely manner for financial reasons.

Many academics in the field also identify the need to establish shared discourses and understandings, but establishing these whilst coming from a position of having to legitimize or defend practice (Krauth & Brien, 2012; Van Loon, 2014) is particularly problematical. Doctoral candidates, as well as Creative Writing academics are thus working in a context that can feel ghettoized and even hostile. Further, debate continues around what should constitute a disciplinary identity, the nature of creative research, the creative PhD specifically and how any of these should be evaluated (Brook, 2010; Brien, Burr & Webb, 2010; Kroll & Finlayson, 2012; Nelson, 2004) The inconsistency and lack of clarity about what is expected in the field of Creative Doctorates is another factor that can destabilise the doctoral experience. These issues can leave candidates questioning the value of their creative output, and hence their writerly identity. The field is still in development, and these issues will no doubt move forward as the debate continues.

Nurturing Writerly Identity

So what are some potential ways of helping students successfully navigate the clash of identities, to survive what Finlayson calls 'a prolonged period of uncertainty of self' (2012, p. 2)? On a macro scale there needs to be a shift in academic culture so that creative works, the generation of knowledge through creative research and the unique type of knowledge generated in this way are all legitimised and valued (Hetherington, 2010; Webb, 2012). This is being addressed by the AAWP through the inclusion of a creative stream at conferences, and through the inclusion of creative works in academic journals, and could be enhanced further through colloquiums which encourage students to present their creative writing and university publications. Other solutions are easier to address.

Recognising and Supporting Creative Practice

Faculty and supervisory practices can ensure students have ways to maintain their writerly identity, which will have the benefit of also communicating the value of that identity. These practices may include writers' groups for critical friendship and social support: such groups, according to Neave, can create room for possibility, collaboration and development (2014, np). Support groups can enhance inquiry as students share their experiences, ideas and insights, creating, according to Springgay et al (2008, p. 336) a living, shared inquiry that can help students move more comfortably through the times of not knowing to discover new meanings.

Recognising and encouraging the importance of practices that stimulate creativity such as reading creative texts not just for analysis but in order to respond in a more emotional way to what is read (Neave, 2014, np) can restore a sense of the enjoyment of reading, which can easily be lost when all reading is actually the self-conscious practice of meta-reading focused on questions of how the writer did what they did. Artworks or other imagery can also function to restore the flagging creative soul (Dunn, 2014). Experienced creative practitioners are likely to have a number of techniques in their professional tool box to assist their creative writing process, and the importance of these needs to be recognized. Gandolfo calls for room for the imagination to play, to return joy and spontaneity to writing (2006, np). As Van Loon points out, the academy can dismiss how essential play can be in creative research, and disregard the need to embrace it as part of the search for new knowledge (2014, np).

Orientation to the Field

Whilst a greater emphasis on creative practice will help balance the equation, from the academic side a process of orientation to field and habitus (Webb, 2012) would be of benefit. Giving doctoral candidates explicit direction in identifying the codes of signification (correct language), expectations, uncertainties and ambiguities and what Kroll and Finlayson call 'historical embeddedness' (traditions, key figures, core debates) (2012, np) relating to scholarly practice in creative writing degrees would ease them through the periods of tension and dissonance with a greater sense of direction. Part of the orientation for students could also involve making explicit the likelihood of tension and discomfort whilst emphasizing that this can lead to critical reflexivity and insight.

Entering academia, students bring a range of expectations, such as achieving publication, establishing an academic career and developing their skills as a creative practitioner. Brooks notes that is important to manage these, but also to expand their expectation to encompass a recognition of the broader range of skills they develop as a creative researcher through the PhD process (2010, p. 9).

Explicitly Recognising the Development of Writer-Researcher Skills

Whilst Brooks links managing student expectations to preparing them to take a place in the cultural production sector (2010, p. 7), the idea might offer another way to move forward. Central to forging a new academic identity for the creative practitioner is learning to "apply the processes of knowledge construction to themselves and their own discipline" (Webb, 2012, p. 12). By working with students to explicitly identify the skills and knowledge they bring with them, and the ways in which these develop over the course of the Doctoral process, supervisors and other faculty staff could not only support the maintenance of their writerly identity but facilitate its integration as one aspect of a new professional , making explicit Finlayson's developmental process of crafting a new hybrid identity (2012, p. 5).

Recognised skills might include the ability to be innovative and flexible (Brooks, 2010, p. 6), to understand the institutional frameworks within which practitioners must operate (Brien, Burr & Webb, 2010), to be self-reflective practitioners (Gandolfo, 2006; Webb, 2012), to undertake research, synthesis and analysis (Hetherington, 2010), and to interrogate tacit knowledge (Webb, 2012). Webb is optimistic that artist-academics can comfortably become double-mode practitioners (2012, p. 10), whilst Gibson believes artist researchers can develop

a specialized double mentality, a 're-disciplined capability that we need for finding our way through today's complex and changeful world' (2010, p. 10).

Conclusion

The overall picture established here is that students enter a state of dissonance and uncertainty when they commence their Doctorate because of questions of fit as a creative practitioner within the academic realm, and because of the competing demands of the artefact and exegesis. Further, since the emphasis is placed, even if only implicitly, on the production of an acceptable theoretical document, writerly identity can be destabilised to a lesser or greater extent. A review of the debate across issues of *TEXT Journal* shows that even established academics struggle with issues of writerly identity in the light of these issues. Managing this struggle can be facilitated through a shift in academic culture, a deliberate nurturing of creative practices, orientation to the field, and making explicit the process of identity development that occurs during the writing of the PhD. Helping students to recognize that the outcome of their Doctoral candidacy will be not just a document that speaks from a single location, but a document that speaks with the voice of of a professional creative researcher could provide a clearer sense of direction and purpose as they negotiate the challenges of the Creative Writing Doctorate.

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