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Writing our future: Towards an organisational history of the Australian Association of Writing Programs

Abstract:

At the thirteenth annual conference of the Australian Association of Writing Programs in 2008, the author suggested that a history should mark the fifteenth anniversary of the organisation in 2011, and proposed to begin researching and writing such a history. This proposal was endorsed by the Committee of Management at that conference. This paper presents the first steps towards producing a history of the AAWP, framed by the recent calls for a 'turn to history' in the study of organisations (Clark and Rowlinson 2004; Üsdken, Behlül & Alfred Kieser 2004; Booth and Rowlinson 2006) and the author's research into the practice of writing organisational history writing.

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Background

The formation of the Australian Association of Writing Programs (AAWP) in 1996 marked a formal and astute recognition of the professional requirements of writing as a tertiary-level discipline by those teaching and researching in the discipline in Australian universities. Since 1996, the organisation's twin foci of dialogue and best practice dissemination have been encapsulated in the association's annual conference, the first of which was held at the University of Technology in Sydney, and its peer refereed journal, *TEXT*. The youth of the discipline in Australia and the engagement of the organisation's membership and other constituents ensured the AAWP became the most important national forum for discussions about the discipline of writing in higher education, and has informed the development of creative arts' teaching and research in Australia and beyond. At the thirteenth annual AAWP conference in 2008, the author suggested that a history should mark the fifteenth anniversary of the organisation in 2011, and this proposal was endorsed by the association's Committee of Management. This paper presents the first steps towards conceiving, structuring and producing that history of the AAWP.

Organisational history

A survey of the organisational histories held by the National Library of Australia reveals a number of commonalities, including that significant anniversaries or other milestones often prompt the formal recording of an institutional history as a way of celebrating past achievements. Organisational histories are, however, written for a number of reasons. Such a history can be completed as an attempt to share information, experiences, knowledge and innovation within, and beyond, the organisation. It can be part of internal policy review and development (motivated by the desire to support the organisation's current work by collecting and analysing the process of the development of successful policies and procedures), or for externally focused reasons such as advocacy or as part of a public relations campaign. A history can make an organisation's expertise visible and publicise its prominence as an information or services provider, and its very existence can raise the credibility of the organisation. Organisational histories can also generate much needed income for not-for-profit associations. While almost never published by mainstream publishers, histories of large national or international organisations can generate significant sales, especially within those institutions' own memberships and supporters, and many such volumes have been produced, at least in part, for fund raising purposes.

Such histories can have many effects upon the organisation itself. On a functional level, the process of undergoing the necessary research for a history may become a springboard for improving both record keeping and how these are records, once made, are stored and archived. More conceptually, the creation of a history can also mark an important moment in how an organisation understands itself and its identity, as most organisations that embark upon the activity of writing their own histories do so after the initial work that prompted its setting up is completed or, at least, well advanced. This makes sense, as in the first phase of an organisation's work, there is commonly a focus on the body's major goals—the reason it was formed—and, in the case of many

activist or professional groupings such as the AAWP, the attempt to achieve these absorbs all available resources and energies. Records kept in this initial stage—beyond those required for compliance reasons (such as financial records)—are usually sketchy, with the minutes of formal meetings often the only surviving documentary evidence from an organisation's beginnings (Cheria 2004). Whether these records are made and kept and, if kept, how complete this archival record is, is a common issue in the early period of establishment and development. Next may come a phase of increasing systematisation within the organisation and its processes, although this may not, in itself, lead to the generation of lasting documentation.

A formal history can also enrich relationships between the organisation's members and with other constituents. The process of gathering evidence can encourage existing members to increase their level of engagement with the organisation and prompt lapsed members to re-engage with its work. For such purposes, many organisations find a printed volume useful, and this is sometimes released conjointly with an exhibition of retrieved memorabilia. In this way, the project of writing a researched history can lead to diverse museological activities including online and permanent physical displays of material artefacts.

While organisational histories have many applications, one that is rarely discussed is the potential for such texts to not only provide insights for other similar organisations which can learn from the example provided, but for the entity which is itself under this scrutiny as well. The process of conceptualising and researching such a history, and deciding upon its themes and focus, as well as what is to be given less attention in the resulting narrative, can help to identify and define the identity of the organisation as well as encourage a shared sense of its position in the culture in which it operates. The findings of the research involved can, moreover, act as a catalyst for self-reflection, and trigger future change and, even, transformation within the organisation.

Framing forms

While the writing of history has been attended by centuries of debate around objectivity and subjectivity, fact and fiction, and analysis and interpretation, the specialist area of organisational history is a recent addition to disciplinary scholarly inquiry (see, for instance, Booth and Rowlinson's editorial introduction to the new journal *Management & Organizational History*, 2006). In its most basic definition, organisational history utilises the historical method to research and document the activities of businesses or associations. At its best, an organisational history also attempts to unpack and understand the workings of an organisation, including the personal motivations and sectoral influences at work in its formation, development and current operation. In calling for a more solidly historically-informed study of organisations and their management, Charles Booth and Michael Rowlinson have posited that organisational history is a distinctive field of emergent research with links to traditional disciplines in the humanities such as history and philosophy, as well as new disciplines such as business and management. This focus includes attention to a number of factors that overlap my own interests, including the methods and styles of history writing utilised in constructing such narratives, and a consideration of how

organisational culture intersects with individual motivation and memory (Booth and Rowlinson 2006).

Having written, or contributed to, a number of organisational histories—including those of Ford Motors (1988), Sydney University's Power Institute of Contemporary Art (1988b), the Museum of Contemporary Art (Sydney) (1991), the Yurandali Artists Cooperative (1993) and Done Art & Design, the company founded by artist and designer Ken Done (1994)—this experience has shown that one of the main challenges inherent in such projects is how to fashion an engaging narrative from such ostensibly unprepossessing and uncontroversial documents as annual reports, meeting minutes and financial statements. Supervising others working in this area, including a Master of Arts project writing the history of Outward Bound Australia (Klaebe 2005), and undergraduate student histories of the 9th Battalion of the Queensland Army (Royal Queensland Regiment) (see Bruns & Brien 2003), has added to my own working knowledge of how to shape such narratives for reader interest as well as experience in dealing with a range of issues around the sourcing of the necessary data.

In this, narrative history, a sub-category of creative nonfiction, provides a framing dimension for an organisational history written by an insider—an author who, like myself is a member of the organisation concerned. Social history, with its mix of factual detail and personal anecdote, and focus on the ordinary rather than the great, provides a useful model for constructing this kind of historical narrative. This is particularly suited to this project of the AAWP as what Hobsbawm has called 'grassroots historians' (1988: 13) have not only focused since the 1960s on writing engaging narratives, but also systematically addressing the problems of dealing with scarce documentary evidence and the vagaries of eye witness memory. If understood also as a form of public history, organisational history can incorporate processes that allow those eyewitnesses to become actively engaged in the project. Helen Klaebe has termed this form of engagement 'participatory public history', underlining that the history thus created is not made solely *for* the public as consumers, but actively *with* that public as co-producers. Klaebe outlines how such an approach requires the historian to draw on a diverse skill set that includes skills in oral history methodologies and an advanced ability to creatively marshal the material thus gathered into a narrative shape (2006: 10). In forging such an amalgamation—the result of which will be in at least some part a group biography of the AAWP's members—it is also necessary to keep in mind Vansina's recognition that memories of the past are articulated and heard in the present:

Oral traditions are documents of the present, because they are told in the present. Yet they embody a message of the past, so they are expressions of the past at the same time. They are a representation of the past in the present (1985).

Oral history interviewing appeals to me because, as various researchers have discussed, such a process not only gathers source material but also has the potential to empower individuals or social groups through the process of remembering and reinterpreting the past (Perks & Thomson 2006). In this, oral history is, according to Michael Frisch:

a powerful tool for discovering, exploring and evaluating the nature of the process of

historical memory—how people make sense of their past, how they connect individual experience and in its social context, how the past becomes part of the present, and how people use it to interpret their lives and the world around them (ctd in Bornat 1999).

The oral history interview ‘in which the respondent is asked to recall events from his or her past and to reflect on them’ (Bryman 2001: 505) thus seems a particularly suitable tool for mining information for a history of the AAWP. This information will be valid data when used in association with, and checked against, such traditional historical resources as meeting agendas and minutes, published public addresses and conference publications, and personal documents such as letters, photographs and diary entries. The challenge will be, of course, to incorporate the various points of view and possibly conflicting memories of those interviewed into an intelligible whole.

While the interviewer may gather a great deal of information in this way, the historian’s key task is that of sculpting the final narrative from this information. This begins, however, at the data gathering stage—when questionnaires and sets of interview questions are created, participants and interviewees are selected, and continues through how the resulting testimonies are shaped by the manner in which questions are asked (Portelli 2000). The sculpting process thus not only involves checking oral history information against other documentation, but selecting what should be utilised. Questions also arise over whether to treat the information gained during such interviews as raw data to be incorporated into a seamless narrative, or whether to attempt to keep the individuality of each participant’s testimony in the result, such as in Allan’s (2004) suggestion of including parts of oral history transcripts as discrete anecdotal reminiscences. Such use of such oral history techniques to solicit information from an organisational community and incorporate these materials into a single authored narrative also raises issues relating to copyright and the ownership of this intellectual property, but I believe these can be handled with such standard research instruments as release forms.

Initial theoretical framings

As part of this planning, I have also searched for a way to describe the particular way in which AAWP members relate to the association’s professional field (writing programs) and the broader culture in which this professional field, and this relationship, is located. I have found a beginning in Richard Sennett’s musings on contemporary working life. In *The Corrosion of Character: The Personal Consequences of Work in the New Capitalism* (1998), Sennett describes how, despite rhetoric to the contrary, corporations and corporately managed organisations (such as universities) understand employees, as human resources, to be entirely replaceable. In turn, Sennett reports, employees feel little real loyalty to the organisations they work for and, as much of our self-image is embedded in our idea of our careers, this detachment has significant negative consequences for our (as employees’) emotional and psychological wellbeing. Alongside this, Sennett argues that, although we seem to have a great deal of freedom in choice of career, actual jobs in the modern workplace

offer little autonomy or agency. In these terms, the commitment that members make to a professionally-focused organisation such as the AAWP—a commitment that is manifest in energy, time and money spent on that organisation's business—could be explained by investigating how such an association allows members to shape a coherent narrative around their working lives. That this is created in an atmosphere of collegiality and mutual helpfulness may well induce an allegiance and loyalty that has been transferred from the workplace itself.

Moreover, Sennett's finding that craftsmanship—which he defines as an 'enduring, basic human impulse, the desire to do a job well for its own sake' (2008)—is fundamental for individual as well as collective wellbeing, also has relevance for understanding an organisation such as the AAWP which has an art form (in our case, writing) as an underpinning focus. Such a framework can assist in answering questions such as, just why do people join, and stay members of, such an organisation? If, again according to Sennett, craftsmanship is not valued in the contemporary workplace, and this is contributing to employees feeling demoralized and the lack of loyalty discussed above, then it is possible that being able to invest the 'material consciousness' of craftsmanship (skill, commitment and judgment) (2008) in the association's activities, at least in part, encourages and validates membership.

James Reveley and Peter McLean's (2008) evaluation of two divergent views of employee occupational identification provides another useful and cognisant model for thinking about motivations for organisational membership. In line with Sennett, they discuss the view that occupational identity is waning under managerial processes. They also, however, posit that some employees are not passively giving up their occupational identities, but are, in resistance, developing new ways to sustain these. While, moreover, trade unions are traditionally seen as the sites for such identity formation and resistance, Reveley and McLean suggest that contemporary instances of occupational identification and resistance are much more complex, even in traditional blue collar industries such as the example they give of underground coalminers. Such analysis is useful in terms of asking whether the AAWP promotes and fosters occupational identity for its members, and if so, whether this is shared or individual. At this stage of my research into this aspect of the organisation, I posit that an occupational identity has been developed, and is promulgated and shared through the opportunities for narrative resistance that are embodied in the collaborative discussions and debates of the AAWP's publications and conferences.

AAWP foundational activities: Annual publications and conference

The activities of the AAWP are framed by the online publications of *TEXT* refereed journal each April and October and the annual conference each November. The AAWP has also published a series of anthologies of creative work, a newsletter and more recently, a website. Apart from recording the conference dates and locations, I have not completed any significant research around conceptualising this important element of the association. I have, however, begun to consider how to write a history of the AAWP's publications.

While there has been some recent study of scholarly journals, publication studies research has been focused around certain themes such as the difficulty of getting published (Pannell & Williams 2003); the affect of globalisation on publishing (Wilding 2000); the processes, quality and effects of peer review (Björk et al 2008; Jefferson et al 2002; van Rooyen et al 1999; MWC 2008; Ware 2008), reader access (Morrison 2006), plagiarism and academic integrity (Calabrese & Roberts 2004), the use of citation rates for ranking research excellence (Meho 2007; Seglen 1998) and the validity of these rankings and the evaluation exercises overall (Newman 2008; Redden 2008).

While these will be valid ways of discussing *TEXT*, recent work on company and association publications provides an additional way of conceptualising the AAWP's publications and their impact. Michael Heller's survey of company magazines in Britain and United States between 1880 and 1940, for example, examines not only the history of these publications but how, and why, they changed over this period. In this, Heller demonstrates how company magazines moved from being employee originated, amateurish and aimed at only a section of the workforce, to much more professional productions with more strategic, corporate and widespread functions. He divides the purposes of these magazines into operational (education, dissemination of information and entertainment) and strategic (associated with corporate identity, corporate culture and organisational power) (Heller 2008), a classification that is applicable to AAWP publications. Howard Cox has added a gloss to the above, exploring how, although widely understood as modes of corporate communication aiming to disseminate organisational values, some company publications were employee initiatives (2008). This provides an useful way to think about *TEXT*, as it is a publication which has been run and staffed (in terms of editorial staff and referees) completely by university employees who have received no additional monetary payment and often little, or no, workload allocation from their institutions for this labour. Yet, the journal has contributed significantly to the development of the higher education discipline in Australia and, moreover, facilitated those institutions claiming income for the numerous publications it produces (see, for instance, Krauth & Brady 2004). This independence has ensured that *TEXT* remains beyond the control of any individual university and has guarded against it, as Mike Esbester has examined in relation to other journals, becoming a tool of management (2008; see also Dredge 2008). Another useful concept is, as Simon Phillips has discussed, how professional publications can be used to demonstrate Marchand's concept of 'corporate soul' to employees as much as to clients/customers (2008).

Concluding remarks

Writing authorised organisational history can be, like writing authorised biography, an unadventurous and reactionary activity, resulting in dull hagiography of little interest or value. Recent thinking about organisational history writing from the non-government, non-profit sector has, however, suggested that such histories can be an important and proactive moment in the ongoing process of institution building for their subjects. This is because the act of researching and compiling an organisational

history can prompt searching analysis, criticism and evaluation. Once completed, such a history will allow for a sharing of knowledge and experiences outside of the organisation, but the act of data collection and writing can, in itself, promote knowledge distribution among members of the organisation. Moreover, such an exercise can promote self-reflection among the organisation's membership, and provide an opportunity for self-discovery, learning and future improvement.

My aim in this initial stage of the project has been towards defining what kind of history I could write about the AAWP. This will, as discussed above, be based on recent conceptualisations of organisational history writing and will aim to be reflective, ethical and critical, as well as informative, imaginative and entertaining. The process will necessarily involve introspection, evaluation and the revisiting of past discussions on the part of the AAWP's membership (past and present), who I will be approaching throughout 2010 with surveys and requests for interviews. I take encouragement from a high level of member response to queries to date, and from the knowledge that this type of activity will be most productive when there is a common recognition that the organisation has a value and meaning that is beyond the immediate tasks and actions it undertakes. Writing an organisational history is, therefore, a mark of the AAWP's coming of age as a national peak body, and a fitting way to mark the next stage of the organisation's consolidation and development.

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