

Victoria University

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Creative writing in the enterprise university

Abstract:

This paper will present the preliminary findings of our research project, Creative Writing and the Enterprise University, aimed at identifying and analysing the implications of the growth of creative writing programs in Australia on Australian literary culture. Through in-depth interviews with key stakeholders (educators, students) from three Victorian universities and those working in the industry, this research project explores the impact of the new political economy of higher education on creative writing programs. In this paper, we examine some of the specific issues for creative writing and creative writing programs emerging from the research and the way they replicate broader arguments taking place within higher education in the context of neoliberalism and the enterprise university.

Biographical note:

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Creative writing courses have grown significantly during the last fifteen years, a period that has also seen the reshaping of higher education into what has been called 'The Enterprise University' (Marginson 2002). This paper examines some of the specific issues for creative writing and creative writing programs emerging from our research and the way they replicate broader arguments taking place within higher education in the context of neoliberalism and the Enterprise University.

We have conducted twenty interviews with students, academics and publishers involved in three higher education institutions: a sandstone university, a new generation outer-suburban university, and a vocationally oriented former technical college. Given the small sample size, these interviews cannot be considered statistically valuable but rather *indicative* of the kinds of attitudes one might find towards creative writing courses. Refracted through the interviews are broader struggles around the place of higher education in contemporary society.

The meaning of the university

In 2000, the philosopher Raimond Gaita published a response to the Howard government's economic reforms. Central to his argument was a definition of what a university should be: a 'community of scholars' dedicated to the 'life of the mind'.

When it is most true to itself, the academic community is constituted by the ways its members respond to the ideal of an individuality realised through critical, truthful, historically aware reflection on what it humanly means to live an academic life. (Gaita 1999, 40)

Significantly, Gaita makes clear that this classically liberal understanding of a university – what he calls 'the quiet, daily, communal affirmation of the dignity of living a life devoted to the pursuit of knowledge and understanding' – first came under challenge from the Left rather than the Right. He notes elsewhere how, 'in the 1960s (sic), when the universities were enlisted to support the revolution, or more modestly the cause of social justice, I remember how lame the defences were of courses not strictly relevant to the cause ...' (Gaita 2002: 99).

Though parts of Gaita's essay were first published in *Quadrant*, a conservative journal explicitly and vehemently opposed to the New Left, his expanded arguments appeared in *Why Universities Matter* (2000) and *Scholars and Entrepreneurs* (2002), collections dominated by essayists from the New Left tradition. Ironically, by that time, *Quadrant* had come under control of the neo-liberal Right, led by such former New Leftists as Paddy McGuinness and Keith Windschuttle.

Gaita's example highlights the strange political reorientations in debates about higher education. As Simon Marginson explains, these peculiar inversions can be partly attributed to the relationship between the reforms championed by the New Left in the 1970s and those implemented by the New Right from the late 1980s onward. The 'Enterprise University' should, Marginson suggests, be understood as a:

neoliberal political response to the 'red bases' strategies of the late 1960s and early 1970s, in which the new left student movement sought to reorder the university on the

basis of participatory democracy and turn it into a factory of social intervention and political revolution. (Marginson 2002: 110)

Neoliberalism, in other words, appropriated the form of the New Left's critique for a very different content. The Gramscian project of the Left denounced the elitism of the sandstone universities, and sought to expand higher education and make it more widely available. It challenged tradition and stuffiness, took aim at institutional and canonical authority. In the place of a university justified in terms of the 'life of the mind', the New Left demanded education be socially relevant and publicly accountable.

Relevance and accountability remain key terms for the Enterprise University. But where the Gramscian project was explicitly anti-capitalist (or at least anti-market), neoliberalism presumes the free-market as the only legitimate arbiter of popular will. For the Enterprise University, relevance and accountability are assessed against supply and demand. It challenges tradition, custom and authority, but only against the market. It seeks the expansion of higher education but provides access only according to the market principles of user pays.

The Enterprise University's ability to appropriate older, oppositional forms inevitably fosters misapprehensions as to the stakes involved in debates about education. Simon Cooper argues that:

the university as a place for the discussion of ideas, and transmission of tradition; a cultural institution which can sustain the cultural framework for social interpretation, is less under threat by intervention from the conservative Right than it is undermined by an embracing structural change: the fusion of intellectual practices and market forces.' (Cooper 2002: 1)

That does not mean that interventions by the conservative Right do not take place. Indeed, the most common and spectacular debates about higher education still do reiterate older conflicts: think, for instance, of the common Culture War attacks by traditionalists against the malign influence of tenured radicals on academic standards. Yet Cooper's point is that, such conflicts – while still real and still capable of generating considerable passion – take place in a university transformed by neo-liberalism, even if the participants do not necessarily recognise it as such.

It is in this context that the growth of creative writing within higher education needs to be understood. Too often discussions of academic creative writing begin with a meditation on the basic incompatibility between creative writing and the university. Yet one could equally focus on the parallels. 'Universities,' writes Paul James, '[traditionally] stood in a unique position in the public sphere – in and against both the state and the market' (James 2000: 6). A similar point might be made about literature. That is, even more than higher education, literature is (and has always been) an industry, a niche within the more general business of publishing. At the same time, the literary has defined itself, at least in part, in opposition to the commercial, as a form that cannot simply be reduced to market imperatives.

Given these parallels, it is not surprising that specific debates within creative writing replicate broader arguments taking place within higher education, with neo-liberalism

providing the backdrop. Again, the monetarisation of creative writing in the Enterprise University provides, at one level, the limit by which the development of the discipline is bounded. Yet, within that limit, other discourses continue to circulate. Indeed, the ideas held about creative writing by academics and students can be understood as a process of combined and uneven development, in which a variety of traditions continue to exert influence, albeit within a general framework of neoliberalism.

Creative writing and the drive for publication

The first striking finding from interviews with both staff and students at all three universities was the overwhelming importance attached to student publication. It had been anticipated that publication might be seen as *an* important outcome; it was not anticipated that it would emerge so consistently throughout the interviews as a determinant of the courses' success or failure.

The comparison of attitudes to publication between the three institutions also proved counterintuitive. It might have been expected that the newer university, with its strong TAFE program, would be more oriented to publication as a vocational outcome than the sandstone university with its prestigious academic tradition. But in fact the reverse proved true. Academics at the newer outer-suburban university spoke of the relative absence of student publication. This was, they said, a definite challenge, and something that impacted on their enrolments and future growth. As one student there explained, publication 'would just be a bonus outcome' but was not expected. By contrast, academics at the vocational university discussed the university's record of publication as an important factor driving enrolments. More surprisingly, academics at the sandstone university made the same point. In terms of comparative advantage when attracting students, academic prestige was thought to matter far less than the prospect of student publication.

Furthermore, several academics suggested that student expectation of ultimate publication rose strongly when it came to higher degrees. One interviewee explained:

Students at TAFE don't really know what they want to do but they think creative writing sounds interesting; some are attached to the notion of creative writing as a form of self-expression ... At undergraduate level there are again maybe slightly more students who see creative writing as a vehicle towards publication ... at the Masters level ... the primary goal is relationships with industry, agents and publishing houses and there's a strong agenda by those students, or a strong expectation that they could be published at the end of their degrees ... Certainly in the Masters course I taught in ... there was almost a sense of entitlement, that they expected that they would emerge with a book contract. There are probably three ingredients in that: the profile of the course and how it was marketed, the age and economic background of the students (and their family background) and the third one would be the sheer cost of the program. There's a sense that to get your money's worth you should be getting published. (University academic, with previous TAFE experience)

The focus on publication takes place in the context of an increasingly difficult market for literary work. Indeed, the rise of academic creative writing seems to correspond with a quantitative decline in the publication of the literary fiction that is creative writing's main output. According to Nicola Boyd, in 1996, only one creative writing PhD was awarded throughout Australia and New Zealand (Boyd 2009). By 2004, that figure rose to 25 and then to 35 to 2006. Such figures might be read against Mark Davis's compilation of the number of literary novels published in Australia (Davis 2007). In 1996, Davis identifies 60 novels. In 2004, the figure is 32; in 2006, 28. The correlation is startling and rather grim.

Both the academics and the students showed acute awareness of the difficult market facing writers of literary fiction. Indeed, consciousness of that difficulty seemed a key determinant of student decisions to study creative writing, particularly at higher levels. Some students spoke frankly about the provision of scholarships: they had enrolled, they said, primarily because of the financial support, which would provide an opportunity to produce work for publication. As one put it, '...it was an opportunity to give up full-time work for three years, to focus on my creative work.' Others discussed their courses as offering a support network that provided structure and helped them sustain their morale while they worked on manuscripts.

Few students interviewed showed an interest in creative writing as an academic body of knowledge. The possibility of a higher degree leading to an academic career was canvassed by several of the interviewees but they most often discussed such a development in terms of its potential to provide the employment that might subsidise their writing. After explaining how difficult it can be to make a living as a writer, one student said, 'I want to spend the time I've got left on my PhD doing the things that will put me in a position to get an academic job if one comes up, so: publishing articles in refereed journals, going to conferences and doing some part time teaching'.

Overwhelmingly, the students approved of an orientation to the publishing industry, and saw it as a crucial component of academic creative writing. Indeed, students at the university that did not organise formal contact with publishers saw themselves as disadvantaged. An undergraduate student from the new generation university explained that:

even at the careers day they didn't have any writing related little stalls there. I thought that was kind-of weird... what I hear of other unis you get a bit more industry contacts. ... I probably would have liked more industry related stuff.

Those at the universities that did facilitate meetings with publishers and agents wanted more of them, and some were angry that the university had not delivered what it promised. An international student from the vocational university complained that:

I'll be honest: the course has been very clear right from the beginning that if you're interested in selling your books, they'll be willing to help you. But most of it is at the level of 'Yes, we will help you'. At a Masters level, and as someone paying for the school – we're talking money here – I would expect more 'I have a concept; you help me market this concept', instead of sitting in a class of twenty people where you talk in generally about 'this is how you have to sell a concept'.

The publishers interviewed – from literary publishing houses that regularly spoke with students at the vocational and the academic universities, and often looked at student submissions – broadly welcomed the growth of academic creative writing. They saw creative writing courses, particularly at postgraduate level, as providing a pool of high-quality manuscripts and a concentration of talented writers. As perhaps might be expected, they valued an emphasis on craft and practical knowledge, but saw the scholarly orientation of postgraduate degrees as potentially problematic. A publisher at a small press, herself a former student of creative writing courses, and a regular visitor to postgraduate courses to listen to student pitches, explained:

We get lots and lots of novels that obviously began as a collection of short stories and haven't done the structural changes needed. It's very difficult to try and fit in your academic requirements and also write a book that people really want to read. That sounds a bit harsh but I just don't think that the academic requirements are necessarily always leading you towards a book that is going to be published [...] And the students' work is in a lot of ways really exciting but absolutely, as far as I'm concerned, it wears its research far too heavily or it's a product of academic writing rather than something that you'd want to read. [...] But they could be helped ...[if] the end result [was] discussed a bit more, right from the start.

Another publisher explained that these courses help make the:

work more publishable. There's a sense in which publishing is quite happy to take these things, because of the work that has gone in. It means that there's a defacto early editorial process... which makes publishing these things cheaper.

The first publisher concurred: these courses are, she said:

hugely useful because these days... publishers have less time and money to put towards the different aspects of getting a book to print, so if a book's tight already so you count how many days that saves you in freelance editing.

The industry focus is, of course, central to the Enterprise University project, and causes many academics a certain anxiety. There was, for instance, an awareness of the contradiction between the aesthetic innovation that creative writing might encourage and then the need to appeal to a commercial publisher. 'I know a lot of people aim at publication,' said one academic:

The whole course is geared to secure publication... the criteria for success in the course is that you secure publication. Yet I rather encourage experimentation and pushing the limits ... encouraging edgy work which is political and experimental ... I see it as contradictory within the academy to try and hone marketable work because that just means joining the already written, and if you're encouraging work to fulfill expectations of the status quo then you're not really encouraging anything new.

A number of the academics were concerned about the impact of ties with industry upon the development of creative writing as a research discipline. Several of them spoke despairingly about the institution's attitude to their output. They struggled for recognition for their creative work as research and yet understood that their reputation as critically and commercially successful writers mattered a great deal to the institution. 'I don't think there's great official respect for it,' said an academic at the

sandstone university, of their research. 'But, yes, they [do] like it when participants in creative writing, the teachers, get major awards -- they put it in the uni news, in the newspaper supplement and the university pays for it.'

Conclusion

Given the prevailing unease among academic respondents as to the direction in which the discipline seems to be evolving, the tentativeness with which they expressed oppositional models was noteworthy. Perhaps the most explicitly oppositional vision of creative writing was put like this:

I would rather that creative writing courses cultivated students' voices and cultivated a kind-of ethical sensibility about writing, encouraging students to find a purpose in their writing ... It [should] give you a life education that attracts students who are interested in politics and ideas. ... It's important to recognise the ways in which actually creative writing in the academy is a challenge to those neoliberal ideas and those pragmatic ideas.

In this context, it is, however, worth revisiting Simon Marginson's account of the development of the neo-liberal university. Paul Dawson documents how, in Australia, creative writing entered higher education alongside critical theory – that is, as part of the same (broadly defined) New Left project (Dawson 2005). Creative writing saw itself as anti-elitist and participatory, an explicit challenge to traditional literary hierarchies and canons. It emerged as part of the expansion of higher education; it embraced calls for educational accountability and social relevance.

It is not difficult, then, to see how the appropriation of these terms within the Enterprise University disorients those working within creative writing. The integration of creative writing with the publishing industry is not a process solely driven by the top but rather enjoys considerable support from the students themselves. What is more, it is disarmingly internally coherent. Focusing on publication helps a course expand; makes it both relevant and accountable. In other words, it takes the familiar criteria from the New Left, and represents them in marketised form. Neo-liberalism rests fundamentally on a representation of the market as a democratic expression of popular will, a representation that the modern university reinforces. Given the student willingness to pay for greater integration with industry, academic hesitations can seem authoritarian or undemocratic, a manifestation of precisely the attitudes that the New Left sought to challenge.

Yet it is important to recognise that the pressure on academic creative writing programs from industry is not vocational – or, at least, not in the way that term is normally understood. If the interviewed students overwhelmingly sought publication, none of them believed that they would make a living by doing so. Indeed, they all spoke frankly about the financial sacrifices that writing involved, the need for other employment, the fundamental difficulties of a writing career. Why then did publication matter so much to them?

It is a question that requires further research, partly because the students interviewed, across all institutions, struggled to articulate the intensity of their desire. Respondents

who displayed a quite sophisticated understanding of the realities of the industry became uncharacteristically vague in terms of their underlying motivations. ‘It is just something I’ve always wanted to do’, ‘I like writing and I’d love to do it full time’, ‘I think I have a book in me’: the interviews did not elicit responses of any greater depth, even amongst postgraduates. While the question cannot be answered definitively without further investigation, the very inarticulacy seems itself significant, suggestive of an identification with writing as an experience beyond the expressible: the classically romantic conception of creativity.

Certainly, this was the explanation provided by a number of the academics, when asked to explain both the popularity of the discipline and the material sacrifices students were prepared to make to pursue it. As one put it:

I think there’s something about a student coming to do arts who might say I want to do some writing, I want to be a writer. It gives them some sense of an identity with an arts degree, even if it’s quite dubious or threadbare... Being a writer they think there’s some identity to it. There is a romance to it, there’s a particular attraction ... They don’t see it as wealth bringing, but status – being a creative person, an artist.

The romantic notion of the writer involves an implicit rejection of the marketised economy: the writer is free from money-grubbing materialism to pursue a higher ideal, the exploration of ‘what it means to be human’: as Faulkner put it, ‘The human heart in conflict with itself’ (1950). In another characteristic inversion, the Enterprise University marketises this rejection of marketisation to enroll students into what one academic rather bitterly calls a ‘sausage factory.’

None of this should be too surprising. The free market is defined by its dynamism, its ability to reshape every aspect of human existence. All that is solid melts into air, all that is holy is profaned – and in a largely secular society, there is nothing more holy than creativity. The strange political realignments that have taken place in the general debates over the university highlight the real difficulty in coming to terms with neo-liberalism in higher education. It is a debate that needs to be had within the specific terrain of creative writing.

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