Narrative Interactive Pedagogy for Creative Writing Supervision after Globalisation

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Abstract: Recent government intervention in research in both literacy and higher degree policy across the globe has sharpened universities’ focus on the quality of their students’ productivity, research experience and timely completion rates (Kamler, 2001; Manathunga, 2005). Researchers have sought to highlight the factors that predict students’ timely completion of their studies and students’ participation in the workforce is one such measure of outcome which leaves the discipline of Creative Writing outside the main discourse. This paper addresses the disciplinary and methodological specificity of the PhD in practice-led research and advocates an interactive narrative pedagogy inspired by the psychoanalytic teachings of Lacan (2007[1968-69]) and the ‘radical pedagogy’ developed by Mark Bracher (1999; 2006). It sets into motion an innovative engagement between the fields of Psychoanalysis, Writing and Pedagogy in order to consider the problem transference poses for psychoanalysis and creative writing in an increasingly market driven academia.

Keywords: Creative Writing, Psychoanalysis, Pedagogy, Diversity, Discourse

WHILST THE DEATH of the novel (Sukenick, 1969) became a fait accompli in the wake of ‘The Death of the Author’ (Barthes, 1977[1967]) and the death of the book was proclaimed nearly two decades ago (Garrett, 1991), the death of book culture has just been announced (Young, 2007). The phenomenon is global, for as Young argues in The Book is Dead: Long Live the Book, while reading has not died; book culture has been forced to gravitate elsewhere, principally towards online technologies. Young blames the publishing industry for this state of affairs. It is not technology that has killed the book, Young argues, but rather the lure of commerce coupled with the industry’s failure to capitalise on the way technology has brought about shifts in reading culture. In short, the pressures of corporate ownership combined with the costs associated with printing, marketing and stocking books means that publishers are increasingly driven by ‘objects, not ideas’ (Young, 2007: 10). This is a familiar argument. As Schriffin put it at the turn of the twenty-first century, echoing Baudrillard: ‘not only our belongings but our jobs and, indeed, ourselves have become commodities to be bought and sold to the highest bidder (Schriffin, 2000). Many commentators in Australia have entered the debate and sometimes deplored the fact that new and even more established writers have to compete with crime writers and ghost writers, cooks and crooks, as well as politicians, movie stars and sporting celebrities (Carter and Galligan, 2007), with ‘defences of literature’ and ‘hostility to market culture’ often conflated (Davis, 2008: 4). If this undervalues the after-effects of neo-liberal globalisation, it also underplays ‘the corrosive effects that markets have on education’ (Davis, 2008:5). This predicament itself calls forth some pedagogical reflection.

An international conference on Education Economics and Society held in Paris in July 2008 highlighted the fact that the overarching global discourse across sectors in Education is now firmly neo-liberal across sectors, i.e. from Pre-school to Higher Education (ANALYTRICS, 2008). Accordingly, government intervention in research in higher degree policy across the globe has sharpened universities’ focus on the effectiveness of their students’ productivity (Kamler, 2001; Manathunga, 2005, Williams, 2007). Researchers have highlighted that one of the chief factors that predicts students’ timely completion and students’ is the prospect of participating in the workforce (Davis, 2007; Williams, 2007). How come then that one of the most popular courses in the Humanities is Creative Writing (Dawson, 2005)? How come that so many PhD students in this discipline are writing novels, seemingly unperturbed by the idea that their work might never be published? More importantly, what are the ethical and pedagogical implications of this state of affairs in an increasingly market-driven academia?

‘Globalisation is about “being at home in the world” in a wholly unprecedented manner’ says the novelist Amit Chaudhuri, i.e. ‘in a way peculiarly sanctioned and authored by the market’ (Chaudhuri, 2007: 104). Though this may be true for those who strive in a free-market economy, this may not be true for post-graduate students who embark on the long journey of writing a PhD in Practice-led Research.
as the reality of the book market contradicts the proposition that ‘there are no real oppositions and dichotomies in the globalised world’ (Chaudhuri, 2007: 98)—particularly for students whose writing is not commercial. ‘As an act of acquisition and exchange’, creative writing praxis, is indeed ‘informed by critical understanding of a specific kind related to creative achievement, but not always to notions of “the market”’ (Haper and Kroll, 2007: 6).

In an ominous, if not prophetic, article titled ‘Australian Universities as Enterprise Universities: Transformed Players on a Global Stage’, Currie articulated the risks involved in adopting neo-liberal globalisation practices, such as managerialism and a user-pays philosophy when these are predicated upon a corporate ethos that sits uneasily with scholarly values (Currie, 2002: 3). After globalisation, pressures are still mounting for Australian universities to become more utilitarian. However, as May advises, it is necessary to go beyond the current critique of managerialism (May, 2008).

According to the Pro-globalisation lobby, i.e., the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund, the World Trade Organisation, the World Economic Forum and the G8 Leaders, globalisation in the form of free trade and economic liberalisation was the answer to eliminating poverty and creating wealth. It favoured reducing the size of government and giving more power to businesses by making national borders permeable to the free flow of capital, goods and services. For globalisation is indeed commonly understood in terms of a global capitalist economy even though it has cultural, political and economic dimensions.

Currie’s article drew on a study by Hall and Soskice (2001) where they identified two main types of neo-liberal economies: liberal market economies and co-ordinated market economies, the former being the preferred model adopted by the US, the UK and Australia, and the latter by European nations (Currie, 2001: 3). This has had direct relevance to the University sector: due to reduced taxes and lower public sector funding in liberal market economies, universities are increasingly becoming corporatised, more managerial and more entrepreneurial.

Neo-liberal globalisation remains a significant challenge facing universities. Most governments across the globe want universities to serve their national interests in the global marketplace and there is an increasing tendency to emphasise the practical and technical value of Higher Education, for Universities, like transnational companies, are forming alliances to deliver education on a global scale, using internet technology. For-profit universities are taking advantage of this technology to expand their services. Alarming, this both devalues the Humanities and impacts negatively on student diversity and inclusion.

Further, it also denies students’ desire, the main spring of creativity.

This paper proposes a discourse that privileges students’ desire whilst not necessarily denigrating commercial returns. It is underpinned by Lacan’s ‘discourse of the analyst’ (Lacan, 2007 [1969-70]) and by Bracher’s ‘radical pedagogy’ (Bracher, 1999b; Bracher, 2006) with a view to suiting it to a more ethical approach to doctoral supervision in the mode of ‘interactive narrative pedagogy’.

The University is the site of knowledge production. This varies from discipline to discipline. Critical to the Humanities’ sustained contribution to knowledge are PhD students. However if teaching is ‘the creation of a new condition of knowledge—the creation of an original learning disposition’ (Felman, 1982: 31), then Australian universities are failing their students, for the desire to know has been replaced by the need to produce with cost-efficacy (Davis, 2007). This was foreshadowed in The Enterprise University: Power, Governance and Reinvention in Australia, where the authors critiqued the market-driven nature of the contemporary University while highlighting how the corporate university as an institution is embedded in problematic social changes that compound existing factors of social exclusion (Marginson and Considine, 2000). The thrust of the book ironically echoes Lacan’s 1968 critique of the discourse of the University whereby ‘the discourse of the University is akin to the discourse of the Master’ (Hecq, 2006), and ‘what he has pejoratively termed “academic discourse” situates the “radical vice” in “the transmission of knowledge”’ (Felman, 1982: 22). Two questions arise here: what can a reference to psychoanalysis bring to the institution of the university in a post global age and what ethical choice is situated in the supervisory relationship between PhD candidate and Supervisor in Practice-led Research?

Working closely with research students is one of the most enthralling experiences of academic life. Though still scantily documented (Grant, 2003; Green, 2005), the complexity of supervision cannot be underestimated, for it is both a complex teaching task (Sinclair, 2004; Denholm and Evans, 2007) and a shared enterprise that entails complex investments on the part of both supervisor and student. These investments are as much emotional as intellectual. This is because the dynamics of exchange is based on narrative interactions that are themselves predicated upon an intricate transferential process involving the transference between two subjects as well as the transference to the work and to the institution (Hecq, 2008). The ‘uncertain state of supervision affairs’ is indeed an effect of ‘many social discourses that offer us more ways of making sense of supervision than in the past’ (Grant, 2005: 337). Further, research...
differs across the disciplines (Sinclair, 2004), for ‘while theory in the physical sciences has never really escaped from the requirement of internal coherence at the heart of knowledge, the humanities, because they are embodied behaviours in the very reality of their object, cannot evade the question of their meaning or pretend that the answer doesn’t impose itself in terms of truth (Lacan & Cénac, 1996 [1950]: 13, translation modified).

What constitutes a contribution to knowledge, and how this contribution is presented, also differs, particularly in practice-led research, a growing area across the creative arts, with studio-based, artefact-based and even action-based doctorates, often favoured over traditional research (Barret and Bolt, 2007). The Practice-led PhD in Writing usually comprises an artefact in the guise of a book and an exegesis which entails an analysis of the creative process and its significant moments. These significant moments are recorded in a working journal. In addition, the exegesis often locates the work within the wider fields of practice, theory, and markets. In my own experience, I have found that the vital importance of the journal in the methodology of practice-led research has direct repercussions on both the approach to supervision and the interaction between supervisor and candidate. First, because the kind of knowledge involved in practice-led research both entails a ‘practice of the letter’ (Hecq, 2008a) and retroactive discoveries predicated upon a strong transference to the work, the supervisor should act mainly as a sounding board for the candidate’s ideas and allow candidates to find their own way without having to account for how they spend their time. Third, because of the integrated nature of the practice-led research model, the supervisor should be wary of contributing too much to the project. Finally, because the candidates’ initial desire might emerge or shift radically in the course of the project: whilst the desire to be published may be high on the agenda in the beginning, it might be totally irrelevant at the end—or vice-versa.

These insights have led me to question my own role and position as supervisor. I have drawn on the lessons of psychoanalysis to articulate these in terms of a ‘narrative interactive pedagogy’ that pays particular attention to the transference, for if narrative drives the methodology of practice-led research and the supervision of higher degrees in this mode, it is the transference that drives narrative interactions between candidate and supervisor, candidate and institution, as well as between candidate and work.

Psychoanalysis as teaching, and teaching as psychoanalysis, radically subvert the demarcation line, the clear-cut opposition between the analyst and the analysand, between the teacher and the student….—showing that what counts, in both cases, is precisely the transition, the struggle-filled passage from one position to the other. (Felman, 1982: 38)

The implications of psychoanalysis for pedagogy lie in this transition, ‘the struggle-filled passage from one position to the other.’ A supervisor who would teach her students a relation to language must come before them not as a master. She comes before them as the learner, the analysand, the subject who speaks more than it knows. It is easier said than done, for what is required here is that the supervisor not only needs a textual or literary knowledge of language, but also some intuitive know-how to be able to reverse the situation when faced with students who address her as repository of knowledge, for the task at hand is then to hand them back their question in a way that reveals a rhetorical function. When the student addresses her supervisor as the other, the subject who is supposed to know, the supervisor must redirect the question to the symbolic Other, i.e., to the symbolic order from which the question emerged in the first place. In other words, to the demand ‘What is the secret of writing—tell me the truth’, the supervisor who answers with a list of dot points, or shows power point slides, or produces yet another way to write book, fails in her ethical duty by reinforcing the illusion that teachers know what they are supposed to know—an illusion quickly dispelled by interventions in Writing conferences as opposed to Education conferences.

A psychoanalytic mode of pedagogy strives against reducing identity to subject position through identification. With this premise in mind, supervisors are mindful to avoid the identity-damaging reduction of students to their subject positions (Bracher, 2006). In a pedagogy inflected by Lacan’s teachings, the teacher, like the analyst, would use the power of her position of authority not to undermine a student’s identity, but rather to help the student recognise the contingency of their identity, including unconscious desires that may be in conflict with this identity. Besides, a psychoanalytic pedagogy would deal with the issue of power more ethically by privileging desire over identification. It would indeed offer ‘truly ethical teaching’ that helps ‘students learn, grow, and develop their identity to its optimal extent’ (Bracher, 2006: 156).

A psychoanalytic pedagogy centred on desire would offer ways of achieving five major objectives:

To help candidates become more effective writers as they come to know and trust their own unconscious processes (or resistances) through analysing journal entries.

To help candidates develop personally and become empowered (through finding their voice, taking risks, targeting new audiences).

To recognize and value difference.
To enhance more complex identity structures, thereby enabling social inclusion whilst fostering psycho-social diversity.
To promote social change.

A psychoanalytic mode of supervision would help candidates assume their unconscious desire and thus help them not only improve their writing, but also constitute a unique resource in stretching the boundaries of their writing. In contradistinction to cognitive or social constructivist approaches according to which poor writing results from inadequate skills or knowledge, I would argue with Bracher that many of the writing problems encountered by higher research students are related to conflicts between ego and subject (Bracher, 1999: 68-124) and that further difficulties arise because the stretching of boundaries necessitated by autobiographical or experimental texts in particular may induce ‘writer’s blocks’ arising from forms of anxiety that either impede or severely disorganize transference to the work.

Narrative is what drives the methodology of supervision in Practice-led research. The term ‘narrative’ is ambiguous for psychoanalysts and writers alike. In psychoanalysis, narrative can refer to the stories told by patients in relation to their family romance, for instance. It can also refer to the interventions in which the analyst undertakes an extension into ‘myths’ (Bion, 1963), to a particular quality of the analyst’s interpretations (Ferro, 1996) or to punctuations (Fink, 1997). It can also mean the writing up of a case history. Ultimately, it can be understood as the construction of a narrative truth (Lacan, 1953-4; 1959-60; 1966; 1972-73) as opposed to historical truth, for truth is never empirical and verifiable, but rather a relation to knowledge in language involving the subject’s recognition of the source of knowledge in a particular narrative. Truth is recognition of the rhetorical dimension underlying every cognition. With this truth, the subject rediscovers his or her place in a narrative from which consciousness has been suspended.

The term ‘narrative’ is no less ambiguous in the discipline of Writing. My own use of the term may echo most of the above and include the stories told by students during a supervision session, telephone conversations or e-mail exchanges in relation to their personal history and experiences, notes taken during supervision, the words, graphs and drawings that figure in journals, etc. It may also refer to the exegesis and the artefact as well as to the construction of a narrative truth in the making of these narratives. However, with regard to the supervisory meeting itself, by narrative I mean the interactivity between candidate and supervisor without the interpretative caesuras used in psychoanalytic sessions, for ‘textual (or analytic) knowledge is … that peculiarly specific knowledge which is subsumed by its use value, having no exchange value whatsoever’ (Felman, 1982: 31-2). It is as if candidate and supervisor ‘were together constructing a drama within which the various plots increase in diversity, intersect and develop, sometimes in ways that are unpredictable and unthinkable for the two co-narrators, neither of whom is a “strong” holder of a preconstituted truth’ (Ferro, 2006: 1). It could be said that to some extent this interactive narrative, or ‘co-narrative transformation’ (Ferro, 2006: 1) contributes to the making of a creative field. However, the narratives themselves arise from the phenomenon of transference.

Taken in its specificity, the term ‘transference’ applies strictly to the analytic treatment. However, its wider implications for the field of the Humanities was incipient in Freud’s first conceptualisation, i.e., as another term for the displacement of affect from one idea to another (Freud, 1900: 562).

‘Transference is not an inter-human relationship’ Lacan scandalously stated in the sixties (Lacan, 1960-61: 123), thereby stressing the relationship between the transference and the order of the signifier, i.e., of that which represents the subject for another signifier. Thus transference, which involves a movement between human subjects, is beyond intersubjectivity: the subject’s existence does not coincide with that of the biological individual–even less so with the person. Indeed, for Lacan, the individual is undivided whereas the subject is divided and the person is a persona, the actor’s mask, as it were, or the character in the human drama: both (mis)represent the subject yet cannot be identified with it. A failure to recognise this beyond inter-subjective dimension of the transference reduces it to the observable emotional expressions and interactions between two people, i.e., phenomena which are presumed to take place in a dual relationship that excludes the dimension of language. This does not mean, of course, that this erotic (imaginary) dimension of the transference should be dismissed, but for Lacan it does necessarily follow the defiles of the signifier, predicated as it is on what Freud called ‘the necessary conditions for loving’ (Freud, 1910: 231).

But if transference is not an inter-human relationship, what is it? And how can it be said to drive the formation of narratives?

Lacan’s ‘An Intervention on the Transference’ (Lacan, 1951) works with Freud’s initial idea while developing it in dialectical terms, dismissing ego-psychology’s explanation in terms of affects: ‘transference does not refer to any mysterious property of affect, and even when it reveals itself under the appearance of emotion, it only requires meaning by virtue of the dialectical moment in which it is produced’ (Lacan, 1966 [1951]: 225). Thus, when Lacan later says that transference often manifests itself un-
nder the guise of love, he makes it clear that it is the love of knowledge that is concerned (Lacan, 1975 [1953-54]; 1991 [1960-61]), with knowledge being imputed to some ‘subject supposed to know’ (Lacan, 1977 [1964]: 232).

Lacan’s 1964 definition is of particular value for teachers. According to this view, ‘as soon as there is a supposed subject of knowledge... there is transference’ (Lacan, 1977, [1956]: 232). Consequently, as soon as there is transference, there is a power disparity. If this is true of the analytic relation this is compounded in the supervisory situation where the degree of disparity is heightened by the fact that the supervisor is subjected to the discourse of the University. Power-relations induced by the transference are also intensified by the mode of pedagogy at hand.

‘The reason teachers cannot shed the mantle of authority is transference’, says Bracher (1999b: 128). This is so in the overtly authoritarian modes of pedagogy that function according to the master-disciple paradigm (Frow, 1988; Owler, 1999). But this is also the case in modes of pedagogy which actively critique these authoritarian models, for the authoritarian model, for the ‘active, enunciating subject’ doing the critiquing subject ‘not only remains an object of the transference’, but ‘its power is actually enhanced by the act of critique’ (Bracher, 1999b:129). As objects of transference, supervisors, like analysts, cannot escape their authority. The question is to determine how to operate with it in an ethical manner. The question is one of desire.

Bracher identifies three main types of literary pedagogies, i.e., traditional, professional and protest pedagogies. Each of these pedagogical types, Bracher argues, is inscribed within a particular discourse. Using a Lacanian framework, he aligns traditional pedagogies with the discourse of the Master, professional pedagogies with the discourse of the University and protest pedagogy with the discourse of the Hysteric. In the discourse of the Master, the agent foregrounds and valorises certain identities, ideals, or values which Lacan calls master signifiers. The most acute form of master pedagogy manifests itself in the ‘cult of the great teacher’ (Graff, 1992: 114) whereby the teacher is in the position of object of admiration and identification. A subtler version of master pedagogy occurs when the teacher demands that his students acknowledge not his own greatness, but the greatness of the authors, works or values he identifies with. A third type arises when the teacher’s desire is to establish the hegemony of certain master signifiers, e.g., ‘original’, ‘great’, ‘experimental’, etc. Professional or university pedagogy is a pedagogy whereby lecturers deposit their knowledge in students for validation, preservation and reproduction. The teacher’s desire here is for the sense of or-
the ethical problems of the pedagogies alluded above, can the same desire for absolute difference constitute the basis of an effective supervisory pedagogy? What would a pedagogy based on such a desire entail after globalisation?

Interactive narrative pedagogy in supervising higher degrees pays particular attention to the candidate’s transference to the work, institution, and supervisor. Many of our students alter their identifications and embrace new master signifiers when they engage with practice-led research in the process of journaling or writing the artefact. Supervision often alters the systems of knowledge or belief that candidates inhabit. In fact, in some cases, changing such systems may be the aim of pedagogy. This is particularly true where identities are fragile and identification with institutions problematic. This pedagogical approach offers students a variety of options concerning the setting, process, form, and content of their writing. Whilst it is the supervisor’s responsibility to alert PhD candidates the demands of the book’s marketplace, it is also her duty to bracket off the master signifier of money and its avatars, such as fame and recognition, in order to preserve desire.

A supervisor’s task in implementing a psychoanalytic pedagogy would indeed first and foremost be to articulate and act on her desire for absolute difference. Mark Bracher’s chapter ‘Self Analysis for teachers’ (Bracher, 2006: 135-47) is a must for any supervisor interested in using a psychoanalytic pedagogy as it offers practical ways in which teachers can chart their own systems of knowledge. Whilst the reflective practice encouraged here does not replace the knowledge an analysis would yield, it nonetheless offers pragmatic strategies for gauging ethical desire. In a second step the supervisor motivated by an analytic desire would help her candidates ask questions pertaining to identity:

- What are the formative elements of my systems of belief and knowledge?
- What is the impact of such identity components on my life and work?
- What are my ideals and values (master signifiers)? Where do these come from and why?
- What is my scenario of ultimate fulfillment?
- What conflicts do I identify in myself via traces in my work? How is language responsible for these?
- What causes ‘writing block’, ‘writing mania’, and ‘utter satisfaction’?
- Why this PhD?
- Where to—regarding completion, publication and social recognition?

Such pedagogy requires not only emotional intelligence, but also constant self-reflection on the part of both candidate and supervisor. The knowledge enhanced by such pedagogy, however, concerns investments in language much more than in relationships. It therefore has uniquely durable personal and social benefits. These benefits are nowhere more obvious than in supervising students who present with fragile identities, as is the case in incarceration institutions, detention centres, hospitals and community workshops (Hecq, 2008b).

It is important to note that markets in which people compete for private gain can only come into existence against a backdrop of shared practices and expectations, but without desire this is jeopardised. Now that knowledge has become the global goal of a struggle for knowledge capital in a market driven academia, both creativity and the production of new knowledge are jeopardised. So is the health and sustainability of our society. An interactive narrative pedagogy can become a powerful tool for ensuing that diverse voices are heard and recognised by promoting desire, and hence creativity, well-being.

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