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Interactive Narrative Pedagogy as a Heuristic for Understanding Supervision in Practice-led Research

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Abstract
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. It sets into motion an innovative engagement among the fields of Psychoanalysis, Writing and Pedagogy in order to consider the possibilities that transference offers supervisors and candidates in two specific environments, i.e. an on-campus setting equipped with infrastructure resources and an off-campus setting devoid of such resources. I argue that an ethical handling of the transference promotes creativity and benefits the community at large.

Keywords
Creative writing, Doctoral supervision, Pedagogy, Psychoanalysis, Transference

Preamble
Recent government intervention in research in higher degree policy across the globe has sharpened universities’ focus on the quality of their students’ productivity, research experience and timely completion rates (Kamler, 2004; Manathunga, 2005). Researchers have highlighted the factors that predict students’ timely completion and students’ participation in the workforce is one such measure of outcome (Davis, 2007; Williams, 2007). Many universities are tightening their selection processes as a way of improving retention and completion rates as Australian data suggest that the main factor determining academic success is socio-economic well-being, despite diversity being actually an index of creativity and innovativeness (Brecknock, 2004; Florida, 2005). This paper grew out of the challenges that I encountered in supervising PhD students in a maximum security prison with two colleagues. It is now part of a larger research project which takes a proactive and more socially equitable approach to improving the learning environment, well-being and social recognition of University postgraduate students in particular by scrutinising the corporate discourse disseminated in Higher Education policies. Whilst the broader project will propose an alternative discourse underpinned by Bracher’s ‘radical pedagogy’ (Bracher, 1999b; Bracher, 2006), this paper focusses on developing ‘radical pedagogy’ into an ‘interactive narrative pedagogy’ suited to doctoral supervision.
If teaching is ‘the creation of a new condition of knowledge _ the creation of an original learning disposition’ (Felman, 1982: 31), then Australian universities have been failing their students for some time, for the desire to know has been replaced by the need to produce with cost-efficacy (Davis, 2007). And yet one sector of the University that is thriving (Dawson, 2005) is not cost effective: the discipline of Writing.

For the French existentialists, words are actions. Nowhere is this clearer with reference to the state of Australian universities as in Marginson and Considine’s (2000) The Enterprise University: Power, Governance and Reinvention in Australia which criticises 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. This is ironically congruent with Lacan’s (1968) critique of the discourse of the University. Indeed, ‘for Lacan, 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). Therefore, a rethinking of the ethos of university education is necessary. Such rethinking underpins my critique of current literary pedagogies of supervision, pedagogies which are predicated not upon ‘the creation of a new condition of knowledge’ (Felman, 1982: 31), but upon a neo-capitalist discourse that stifles creativity.

Working closely with research students is one of the most exciting and rewarding experiences of academic life. Though still poorly documented (Grant, 2003; Green, 2005), the complexity of supervision cannot be underestimated. Supervision of research students is not only a complex teaching task (Denholm & Evans, 2007; Sinclair, 2004), but it is also a shared enterprise in which both supervisor and student have complex investments. These investments are as much emotional as intellectual. This is because the dynamics of exchange is based on narrative interactions that are predicated upon an intricate transferential process involving the transference between two subjects as well as the transference to the work and to the institution. As Grant has shown the ‘uncertain state of supervision affairs’ is an effect of ‘many social discourses that offer us more ways of making sense of supervision than in the past’ (Grant, 2005: 337). Furthermore, 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 (connaissance), 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 & Ce´nac, 1996 [1950]: 13, translation modified).

What constitutes a contribution to knowledge, and how this contribution is presented, also differs. Practice-led research, for instance, is now establishing itself in certain disciplines in the Humanities as alternative to the traditional PhD by research. This paper looks into the complexities of the transference enhanced by the impact of disempowerment upon the dynamics of the supervisory partnership by contrasting two teaching environments and two cohorts of candidates.
Practice-led Research

Practice-led research is a growing area across the creative arts, with studio based, artefact-based and even action-based doctorates, often favoured over traditional research (Barret & Bolt, 2007). The Practice-led PhD in Writing at Swinburne comprises an artefact, a writing journal and an exegesis (Arnold, 2007). One of the crucial questions to be addressed according to this model is: 'What did the writing journal reveal that could not have been revealed by any other form of enquiry?' An analysis of the journal necessarily entails an analysis of the creative process and its significant moments. This is in fact the impetus of the exegesis, whereas its aim is to locate the work within the wider fields of practice and theory. 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, 2008) 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. Second, because writing a journal is itself a process of selfdiscovery and creative development, candidates should have the opportunity 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, some projects in practice-led research necessitate the setting up of a joint or panel supervision.

Over the years, 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.

Why Psychoanalysis?

As I have argued elsewhere, psychoanalysis and writing have much to offer each other (Hecq, 2008). For two decades, writing instructors in particular have explored the possible synergies between psychoanalysis and pedagogy (Berman, 1994; Bracher, 1999a, 1999b, 2006; McGee, 1987; Murphy, 1989). McGee and Murphy draw attention to similarities among teaching, writing and being in analysis (McGee, 1987; Murphy, 1989: 175_185). Berman illuminates the beneficial effects of a psychoanalytically inflected pedagogy on both the academic performance and well-being of writing students. Bracher explores these benefits further and argues that ‘anyone interested in either of these fields or in the educational, personal, or social benefits that either practice can provide will benefit from exploring the intersection between the two’ (Bracher, 1999a: 1). In Radical Pedagogy: Identity, Generativity, and Social Transformation, he maps out the social benefits of a psychoanalytically inflected pedagogy (Bracher, 2006).

Despite the significant parallels between the two disciplines, psychoanalytic pedagogy has never been the flavour of the month. Tobin and Bishop have looked into the reasons for this state of affairs (Bishop, 1993: 504_505; Tobin, 1991: 341, 1993: 29_33). Tobin and Bishop’s objections, it seems to me, derived from a narrow understanding of the transference so common among adepts of American ego-
psychology. It is a similar understanding accrued by a mistrust of Lacanian psychoanalysis which informs Murphy’s reluctance to apply psychoanalysis to her pedagogical practice. Although, she makes the valid point that writing teachers lack the training which is necessary for a psychoanalytic pedagogy, she narrows the aim of psychoanalysis to providing insights for teachers faced with the erotic dimension of the transference (Murphy, 1989: 182_187).

Murphy’s reservations are legitimate: to engage students in the emotionally fraught processes of analysis is perilous, and her reservations about teachers’ training and motivations are well-founded, particularly since teaching, unlike psychoanalysis, also ‘involves a transfer of knowledge that exists independently of the two subjects implicated in the act itself’ (McGee, 1987: 669). Nor can the question of power disparity be underestimated. However, 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 four major objectives:

(1) To help candidates become more effective writers as they come to know and trust their own unconscious processes through analysing journal entries.
(2) To help candidates develop personally and become empowered (through finding their voice, taking risks and targeting new audiences).
(3) To recognise and value difference.
(4) 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 pushing 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, 1999a: 44) and that further difficulties arise because the pushing 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 disorganise transference to the work.

Narrative

Let me explain what I mean when I say that narrative drives the methodology of supervision. In psychoanalysis, the term ‘narrative’ is ambiguous. For instance, narrative can refer to the stories told by patients in relation to their family romance. 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, 2006) or to punctuations (Fink, 1991). It can also mean the writing up of a case history. Ultimately, it can be understood as the construction of a narrative truth as opposed to historical truth. Truth for Lacan is never empirical and verifiable, not in
and of itself knowledge, but 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 withheld.

Since Barthes’s seminal essay on the structural principle of narratives (Barthes, 1977
[1966]) the term is no less ambiguous in the discipline of Writing. My own use of the
term may mirror most of the above and include the stories told by students during a
supervision session, telephone conversations or email 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: 31–32). 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, my emphasis). 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.

Transference

With this bold proposition, Lacan stresses 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 inter-subjectivity: the subject’s existence does not coincide with that of the
biological individual _ even less so with the 44 International Journal for the Practice
and Theory of Creative Writing 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?

The term ‘transference’ first occurred in Freud’s work as another term for the
displacement of affect from one idea to another (Freud, 1900: 562). As the
priority given to ‘idea’ over ‘affect’ indicates, Freud already implicitly proposed that
what he later called ‘transference-love’ (Freud, 1915: 168) was captured by a
network of signifiers. It was, however, in its function of resistance that Freud first encountered it in the clinic. In ‘The Dynamics of transference’, Freud notes that in tracing a complex ‘from its manifestations in the conscious right down to its roots in the unconscious, we soon reach a region where resistance makes itself felt’ (Freud, 1912: 103). This dimension of transference is worth bearing in mind as teachers and supervisors, like analysts often have to contend with resistance in their students. As Bracher puts it, a writer’s resistance, like that of an analysand, is ‘the result of anxiety . . . in the face of the Symbolic Other’s desire’ (Bracher, 1999a: 170).

Lacan’s ‘An Intervention on the Transference’ (Lacan, 1977 [1951]) picks up Freud’s initial idea. Here, he describes the transference in dialectical terms, rebuking ego-psychology for explaining the phenomenon of transference 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 he later says that transference often manifests itself under the guise of love, he makes it clear that it is the love of knowledge that is concerned (Lacan, 1975 [1953–1954], 1991 [1960–1961]), my emphasis) with knowledge being imputed to some ‘subject supposed to know’ (Lacan, 1977 [1964]: 232).

In short, the transference has two dimensions which correspond to the two functions of the analyst in the psychoanalytic setting: a signifying function, since as subject supposed to know the analyst facilitates the production of unconscious knowledge; and a function derived from the analyst's presence and value as erotic object. The phenomena of transference which appear in the Imaginary register (the intersubjective dual relation) become intelligible only when the particular vicissitudes of the transference at the level of the Symbolic register (the signifying chain) and of the traumatic effects which are excluded from symbolisation (and therefore erupt in the Real) are analysed.

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 [1958]: 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.

Transference and Psychoanalytic Pedagogy: A Question of Desire

‘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 functions 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 authority that is being eschewed or critiqued can never coincide with the authority that is producing the divestment or critique, and this active, enunciating, critiquing subject not only remains an object of the transference, its power is actually enhanced by the act of critique . . .* (Bracher, 1999b: 129)

It is for this reason that Lacan professed that the analyst should not interpret
the transference for the analysand, but should rather operate ethically with the
transference. 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 order gained from
inhabiting a system, possessing a body of knowledge and belonging to an institution.
This is the ‘old boys’ club mentality’. The third type of pedagogy arises as an attempt
to counter the authoritarian and alienating elements of the master and professional
modes, just as the discourse of the Hysteric arises to counter the oppression of her
Master and to expose the falsehood of his signifiers.

As Bracher stresses, all these pedagogies pose an ethical problem. The transference
operating in both master and professionalist pedagogies call for students’
identification with either the person (or persona) of the teacher or with the discourse
they represent. The problem of protest pedagogy was denounced in 1968 when 
Lacan warned his revolutionary students that if they wanted a master they would find
one (Lacan, 2007 [1969_1970]), for protest pedagogy inevitably leads to subjection
to some new master signifier. None of these strategies succeeds in erasing the
coercive effects of the teacher’s authority. Instead, each attempts, repeats and
reinforces the same master_slave dialectic (Bracher, 1999b: 128).

Given these reservations, is it possible to work with the transference without
imposing particular master signifiers? The structure of the discourse of the Analyst
based on ‘the Analyst’s desire for absolute difference’ (Lacan, 1977 [1964]: 276)
works with transference in a radically different way, i.e. by helping subjects to
produce their own new master signifier rather than accept one from the subject
supposed to know. Thus when an analysand demands of the subject supposed to
know, ‘whether he is alive or dead’, or ‘what it means to be a woman’, for instance,
the analyst does not desire (as a therapist would) to offer an answer, but rather to
help the analysand articulate an answer. Knowing that answers from her would never
suffice, the analyst desires to help the analysand identify and assume ownership of
those repressed elements that are adverse to the analysand’s master signifiers
(Bracher, 1993: 68_.73). The analyst’s function is to help subjects monitor their own
discourse for indications of these rejected elements. To this end, the analyst
foregrounds in her discourse not her identity, values or ideals, knowledge or beliefs, 
but rather the analysand’s rejected elements as they manifest themselves in the
analysand’s discourse.
As in psychoanalytic treatment, the key to a psychoanalytic pedagogy is a desire for absolute difference which solves the ethical dilemma posed by the transference by avoiding the imposition of new identities, ideals or values. But if a pedagogy animated by a desire for absolute difference could avoid 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 involve?

Towards an Interactive Narrative Pedagogy of Higher Degrees Supervision

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 (especially in off-campus settings) alter their identifications and embrace new master signifiers when they engage with practice-led research in the process of journalling 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 was problematic.

A supervisor’s task in implementing a psychoanalytic pedagogy would first and foremost be to articulate and act on her desire for absolute difference. Bracher’s chapter ‘Self Analysis for teachers’ (Bracher, 2006: 135-147) 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:

(1) What are the formative elements of my systems of knowledge and belief? What is the impact of such identity on my life and work?
(2) What are my master signifiers _ my ideals and values? Where do these come from and why?
(3) What is my scenario of ultimate fulfilment?
(4) What conflicts do I identify in myself? In my work? How is language responsible for these? What causes ‘writing block’?
(5) Why this PhD? Where to?

Such pedagogy requires not only emotional intelligence, but also constant selfreflection 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 supervision conducted in off-campus settings with no outer resource layer and a student cohort that is more likely to present with fragile identities, as is the case in incarceration institutions, detention centres, hospitals and community workshops. The example I wish to draw upon is a women’s maximum security prison.
‘Powerlessness is ubiquitous in the lives of incarcerated women’ and ‘incarcerated women frequently present with a myriad of medical, psychological and social problems’ (Mahoney & Daniel, 2006: 75). Moreover, the correctional setting compounds these problems. As a result, the self-image of incarcerated women is often poor and their identity fragile. Their resistance to engage with a supervisor is consequently stronger, yet paradoxically, their inclination to identify with the supervisor’s master signifiers is also stronger. From my experience of supervising PhD candidates in a prison, an interactive pedagogy has promoted a language of personal empowerment rather than one of dependence and powerlessness. At the instigation of our Professor, supervision occurred within the framework of a panel comprising two supervisors, one tutor and three candidates. Working within this framework complicated the dynamics of the transference in beneficial ways. First, it enabled a lifting of the women’s resistance to engage with their supervisors. Second, it defused the identification with master signifiers. Third, the interactive conversations between supervisors and supervisees enhanced knowledge and selfknowledge. I contend that a sustained interactive narrative pedagogy over time would boost these beneficial outcomes and might play a central role in the academic success, personal development and social reintegration of candidates studying in a prison setting.

Useful question that may encourage such outcomes link up with the aforementioned list whilst being more specific to being outside the law:

1. Who is responsible for your identity and who contributed to the composition of your life’s narrative?
2. What have been the effects of this sense of identity?
3. To what extent does this identity hold you back?
4. How could you change your identity?
5. How could you maintain a new identity?

Conclusion

Knowledge has now become the goal of a struggle for knowledge capital and it is global. Ethically speaking, this is neither conducive to creativity nor to the production of new knowledge likely to benefit society. An interactive narrative pedagogy can become a powerful tool for ensuring that the voices of disempowered students are heard and recognised. It is also likely to enhance students’ creativity, well-being and social recognition.
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