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Creative Writing as Research and the Dilemma of Accreditation: How do we prove the value of what we do?

1 Introduction

In *The Mind of God*, Paul Davies discusses the proposition that "among scientists...beauty is a reliable guide to truth, and many advances in theoretical physics have been made by the theorist demanding mathematical elegance of a new theory" (Davies 175). Would artists have the temerity to vet the aesthetic criteria by which these theories are formed? The truth is that scientists judge scientists and they construct the standards by which they must be judged. When we come down from the airy realms of theoretical science, in fact, when we consider science in the everyday world of academia as well as industry, a more cogent proposition is not that beauty is a guide to truth, but that funding is a proof of worth. As far as Australian funding bodies are concerned, no matter how elegant or innovative works of art might be, they are not worth as much as scientific product.

The title of this paper is meant to be problematic. Why should we have to *prove* the value of what Australian writer-academics and their students produce? What kind of cultural capital is writing? DETYA (Department of Education, Training and Youth Affairs - note) has only just begun acknowledging (for 2001) a narrow range of creative material as work worthy of research credit:

novels;
books of poetry;
published play or film scripts for productions of at least 20 minutes duration;
published scores of musical works with a duration of at least 20 minutes in playing time;
recordings of live music, theatre or dance performances of at least 20 minutes duration which have been commercially distributed;
films, multimedia productions or sound productions of at least 20 minutes duration which have been commercially distributed.
(Flinders University *DETYA 2001 Research Data Collection*)

This policy totally dismisses shorter traditional forms, such as individual stories and poems, let alone other traditional and non-traditional ones involving text (such as picture books and opera libretti). The proviso that the work be "commercially distributed" is also problematic for some artists and writers. This paper explores the complexities of the above situation, including the conundrum of research equivalence, canvasses the responses to this dilemma from other arts disciplines, and then proposes a strategy for evaluating the diverse types of discourse teachers and students of writing programs in Australia produce.

Creative writing has a range of purposes and benefits for the community. It provides entertainment and intellectual stimulation, but in a larger sense it preserves and promotes our heritage. Furthermore, as all art forms, writing is cultural capital in a quantitative sense, not simply purveying a national image, but exporting the art products a culture makes possible. The Dearing Report into Higher Education in the United Kingdom makes this claim about the arts:

"There is an important shift in progress, from old-style manufacturing to 'culture as commodity'. To take art and design as representing the contribution of research in the arts to this growth, the research contribution of art and design to the culture industries is directly analogous to the contribution of engineering research to the manufacturing industries."
(cited in Strand 13)

The Australian Research Council notes that research (as it defines it) not only increases the stock of knowledge through "conceptual advances and discoveries" (Strand 32), but can result in "applications of social and economic value" (Strand 32). So why is the status of artworks so much lower than the products of traditional research if their influence on the culture is similar?

The opening of the report, *Research in the Creative Arts*, by Dennis Strand (1998), enumerates benefits to Australian culture from the dynamic arts community, which are socially, cultural and economically significant (xii). If the arts help us to see ourselves more clearly, add to the stock of human knowledge, aid in integrating our diverse society and make us money, why are they so neglected?

Even more puzzling is the disregard for the area of creative writing, given the enormous growth in programs and, consequently, of research higher degree students in the past decade. Universities are places that train practitioners as well as future audiences, develop aesthetic theory and pass on knowledge; they "provide the forum for important debates about contemporary cultural concerns, both intellectual and practical, helping to shape Australian culture and identity" (Strand 14). If one consulted the research higher degree manuals of many institutions now, one would find that a variety of modes of presentation of research is acceptable, from static art object to CD-ROM. The students who receive these higher degrees mean money for their institutions, since DETYA rewards degree completions. Yet supervising staff members who produce creative products without accompanying documentation, or ones that do not fit into the narrow present categories, would attract no credit for their institutions.

2 A Narrow Research Culture

'...[The] Sydney Opera House is admirable despite the architect's structural miscalculations that caused massive overruns. Pei's Hancock Tower in Boston was receiving the highest awards for excellence in design at the very time that poor engineering was causing its windows to fall out.' (Edmund Dehnert, "The Dialectic of Technology and Culture," 109)

The above remark points to anomalies in contemporary society's evaluation of technological

as well as cultural products. Why should evaluation of scientific production be without flaws or bias as well? Yet the present governmental research culture in Australia preferences the sciences over the arts massively, as if the intellectual and economic benefits the former produced could not be questioned. There are basically three governmental sources of funding available to support higher intellectual endeavour: The Australian Research Council, DETYA's Research Quantum and the Australia Council. Up to 2001, the Australia Council has not funded what it considers academic research, so I will leave that body aside. Clearly the research culture underpinning the ARC and DETYA is one that has favoured scientific or quasi-scientific methods, although the ARC is in the process of facilitating the grant process for the creative arts.

A negative mindset about the arts has a long history and to some extent we are still battling unacknowledged prejudices and dismissive attitudes. This distrust originated with the father of Western philosophy, Plato, who suspected the imaginative freedom and individuality of the artist, who saw "the creative use of language as a misdirection of its natural purpose" (Dye 94). Centuries later novelist and scientist C.P. Snow, with a foot in each camp, or a hemisphere of the brain in each realm, talked about "The Two Cultures" in his 1959 lecture that elucidated the "mutual ignorance, incomprehension, and lack of communication between the scientific and the literary segments of our culture" (Finocchiaro 15). Suspicion and lack of sympathy still plague us (and particularly cost the arts). Segments of academia distrust creative writing as a subject, let alone consider it research in any sense. As Marcelle Freiman remarks, "the perceived unstructured nature of creative writing, its potential for chaos and irrationality...are seen as a cause for concern" (Freiman 2001), at the same time as we praise academic students for what we still call "creativity."

This conflict between science and art, between the traditional and the new in university culture, has given rise to the anomalous situation where "we praise and seek to encourage creativity in cognitive pursuits, such as science and philosophy, while on the other hand we continue to speak of scientific "findings" and to insist that learning is discovering rather than inventing" (Dye 92). In the last half of the twentieth century philosophers and scientists began to investigate at length the similarities between the modes of investigation and the nature of creativity in the arts and sciences (Amsler 7-10. Each essay in this book has a useful bibliography on this subject).

Does this mean that writers should argue their cases for research credit and for funding by pointing to these similarities, by trying to redefine research, or by twisting and reshaping what they do to fit the standard definition of research? As anyone who has seen the contortionists at the Cirque du Soleil can tell you, contortion itself is an entertaining art form. But is it fundable? Is the daily routine the artists/athletes undergo practice or research? If they study the human body in order to perfect their performance, is that likely to increase the stock of human knowledge? Do we need to distinguish between professional practice and research?

In a recent *TEXT* paper focused on the visual arts, Robyn Stewart points out the dangers inherent in trying to dance (excuse the mixed metaphor) to someone else's tune: "To...pretend that practice is research, undisciplined, without knowledge of what established research paradigms are, is to fall into the same trap as our detractors, by devaluing what we do as vicarious practice" (Stewart 2001). But she takes the analysis of pitfalls a step further by looking at artist-academics as mentors and supervisors, too. If the arts do not take control of their own disciplines, defining what research constitutes for them, she suggests that they risk producing a generation of higher degree students "who clearly are unable to articulate their

methods of investigation, show a clear sense of purpose, structure, or even an awareness of positioning within their field" (Stewart 2001).

So how do we as writers take control of our discipline? For Stewart, the way is clear for the visual arts. She proposes that since the structures are already set, and since utilising them can produce fruitful outcomes, it is expedient to situate the arts within their parameters while simultaneously redefining those parameters:

The culture of this community is underpinned by notions of the centrality of research as a tool for the ongoing development of, and challenge to, knowledge. As practitioners within this culture we may either join in, subvert or deny these basic assumptions. To deny them may spell our demise, to join them may deny the unique characteristics of the arts, to subvert them, by appropriating their accepted processes and restructuring them for our needs, may be the way to go. (Stewart 2001)

But is this the only way? As the debate in *TEXT* over the past few years about the nature of creative arts research has proven, there are alternative approaches. The next section of this paper discusses those approaches.

3 Research and Research Equivalence

'When is a pot or a painting research, or how much is the research element in these items? If it were not for our ever-deepening funding crisis I suggest that we would not be much concerned with these, often ridiculous, questions.'
Malcolm Gilles, Keynote Address at the National Symposium on Research in the Performing Arts (Strand 39)

Research is a word that seems to control our fates; it is the source of all bounty. Acceptable research is verifiable, accountable, *hard* as opposed to *soft*. Research frames questions and proposes answers, often in the form of hypotheses that can be tested. Yet as Thomas Kuhn suggests, "both disciplines present puzzles for their practitioners, and in both cases the solutions to these puzzles are technical and esoteric" (quoted in Stewart 2001). Sometimes, then, only the initiated - that is, expert audiences - can grasp the puzzle as well as the solution. Sometimes the research is expressed in jargon, a technical language that only expert audiences can comprehend.

DETYA accepts the OECD's (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development) definition of research:

Research and experimental development comprises creative work undertaken on a systematic basis in order to increase the stock of knowledge, including the knowledge of man, culture and society, and the use of this stock of knowledge to devise new applications. (Strand 32)

Research is focused on investigation, and the results of that investigation must, "in DEETYA's view...lead to publicly verifiable outcomes which are open to peer appraisal"

(Strand 32).

Various artists, artist-academics and intellectuals have tried to manipulate this definition by focusing on the similarities between the creative process and scientific inquiry, by suggesting that "behind every work of art is a hypothesis about the reality perceived by the artist" (Throsby in Strand 35). It is certainly not a novel idea that serious artists immerse themselves in the history and/or practice of their discipline in order to find out what needs to be done, as T.S. Eliot suggested in "Tradition and the Individual Talent." Eliot believed that writers aspiring to greatness had to undertake such an immersion, to absorb what the past "knows." This process situated writers both historically and culturally and so, by extension, influenced not only a culture's future through their creative products but that culture's perception of its past in the form of the literature already produced (Eliot 23-24).

Scientists as well as artists share a similar need to absorb the past of their particular disciplines, to train themselves, because

expressing oneself relevantly requires a mastery of technique and material and a cultivated awareness of what, in the light of previous accomplishments, can and should be tried. Creativity is never just doing something different. It is doing something different that is significant at that precise point in the cultural tradition. (Dye 100)

The results of sustained scientific or artistic endeavour are then appraised by peers. Like articles in prestigious scientific journals, novels and poetry collections as well as sculptures, paintings and theatrical performances are open to public scrutiny, too (more so perhaps than esoteric scientific theory). It is the terms of those appraisals that seem to be most in contention, however. Sometimes those who focus on manipulating definitions of research forget that evaluation must happen at the end of the process. In her proposal of the term "research fiction," Eva Sallis claims that it "expresses the outcomes of a body of research and which is the culminating point of an investigation which could have been written up, at least in part, in academic prose" (Sallis 1999). Without documentation of some kind, how can nonexpert assessors (even perhaps higher degree examiners) be confident the product has expressed its position satisfactorily? I made this point previously in a paper about creative writing honours students, but it is worth reiterating here. As an examiner of higher degree theses, I am still being confronted by this problem:

The ideal might be to have a writer able to manipulate in fiction, poetry or drama a 'range of purposes from the didactic to the entertaining...' having 'its critical elements...subordinate to its engagement with the emotions and the imagination of its readership' (Sallis 1999). One would think that a laudable goal for any artist, even those not contemplating a university degree.

Whereas that might be possible, however (although not necessarily likely) for a postgraduate - after all, how many have their standard PhD theses published as books - it is fairly unlikely for an honours student. We are talking about varying skill levels and what a sympathetic reader could glean simply from reading an unaccompanied text, or one that daringly tried to incorporate a critical position into its imaginative framework. (Kroll 2000)

Is there a strategy creative writers can pursue other than manipulating definitions of research

and the consequent difficulties with appraisal? We can philosophically argue ourselves blue in the face (creating a clever living art work in the process) but that will not make those who have set the standards change their position. They might accede to our general propositions, but the fact remains that whatever we produce must be counted. The scientifically-minded will still want to know how the assessors will count those productions. What, then, about the concept of research equivalence?

This concept is preferred in the United States and the United Kingdom where funding arrangements are more flexible. Artist-academics needed a concept to enable them to access promotion structures and the consequent standing they would gain in the academic community (Strand 39). So *research equivalence*

is widely used in overseas universities to recognise that the research-based work of academic artists is the equivalent of scientific and scholarly research and of equal value to it in the advancement of knowledge and in terms of its legitimacy to access research funds. (Strand xvi)

The advantage of developing this concept here is that it does not demand that the methodologies employed by various art forms are the same just as the products will not be; this "remov[es] the necessity of having to artificially 'shoehorn' some kinds of creative arts research into a traditional research model" (Strand xvi).

Although this concept has been around in Australia for a while and is at a highly developed stage in some other arts disciplines, I bring it up here because I want to argue for a mixed research scheme that incorporates the notion of research equivalence while acknowledging that some artists' projects fit into more traditional models. For example, a research higher degree exegesis (critical annotation or dissertation) that examines historical antecedents for a writing project or surveys current critical theory can be accommodated more easily in a standard research model (compare with Stewart's discussion of visual arts research practices [TEXT 2001] and "the interconnectedness between differing methodologies as a kind of intertextuality, a bricolage").

In fact, if an individual published a novel "depending mainly upon the imagination of the author rather than a publicly accessible body of agreed fact" (24), their work would be excluded according to DETYA's 2001 *Research Data Collection* guidelines from the lucrative A1 Books category, but if that novel were also published with what could be considered "an accompanying critical scholarly text...if it is a major work of scholarship in its own right" (24), the commentary would count. This qualification confusingly appears directly after the exclusion of novels - on the same line.

The case of a novella is more clear cut (and depressing) under the 2002 guidelines. Without an ISBN, the novella, which might be the result of extensive research about the form or about the subject matter, will not count. As the National Council of Heads of Art and Design Schools (now Australian Council of University Art and Design Schools) commented in 1993: "In the same way that a learned paper is evidence and coherent argument for all the processes that preceded it, laboratory or speculative, the finished work of art or design is the culmination of the theory and practice of the discipline" (quoted in Strand 34). But how do we prove this to the assessors?

4 Of Strategies and Schemes

Rightly or wrong, quantitative data, in the view of many, is better understood, more accessible and more 'correct' than qualitative information, which is often seen as mere opinion or assertion. (Strand 109)

In the climate described in the Strand report, writers might do well to utilise some of the categorisations already adopted by other creative artforms and tailor them to their needs in a coherent framework. Before suggesting how we might do this, we should note that in writing, as in other arts, at present there are basically three ways of looking at intellectual/creative investigations. I also want to emphasise that I do not think one is superior to the other - they are simply different, and allow writers to express their creative and intellectual interests in diverse forms. Because we all have our personal as well as institutional orientations I think we have sometimes been debating fine points that ultimately will only matter to us, not to the funding bodies.

Malcolm Gilles outlined these three approaches to investigations in the creative arts. The first describes "research...exclusively about the art form" (Strand 40):

1. The conservative approach: research is research...[it] involves dispassionate investigations into 'problems', is normally critical, analytical or historical in nature, and is, usually after vigorous vetting, published in written, well-documented form. (Strand 40)

Gilles seems uneasy about the second approach, although many postgraduate students that follow this path find it a fecund method of study:

2. The pragmatic approach: that awkward half-way house, argues that research does require extended, dispassionate commentary of some kind, but that this commentary could be self-reflective, that is, upon an art work often created by the commentator. The work of art is, therefore, recognized also as research, as it is an indispensable part of the research project. (Strand 40)

In this incarnation, the creative product needs to be accompanied by some form of documentation. This method has been dubbed "research *in* the art form" (Strand 40). Those who object to this mix as a watering down of creative effort might liken the situation to a mother having to follow her child around explaining her to the world. Alternatively, those who practice it or enjoy reading its fruits find it intellectually stimulating, realising that the product would not have taken its final form if it had not been accompanied by the self-reflective process.

Finally, there is "the liberal approach" (Strand 40), or "work *in* the art form" (Strand 40), which seems to cross over into what others deem professional practice. This third way

asserts that creative arts practice is a vital non-teaching contribution to university and national life, and, in the absence of any other suitable category, needs to be rewarded in the 'research' category. (Strand 40)

It should be pointed out that other peer groups in the creative arts are not so keen to lose the distinction between professional practice and research, seeing "critical reflection" (Strand 33)

as integral to the process, and admitting that, although necessary, simple practice is not research and should be supported under different guidelines:

The possibility of that [research] exists only when the worker pauses in one of these activities, and says 'what if?... IF the question is important enough, and IF a proposition can be advanced in relation to it, then the classic process of research can commence. (Strand 51)

Arts practitioners who have learned how to phrase research proposals to fit the first and second categories are already ahead of the game as far as obtaining funds go, but the Research Quantum audit can still defeat them by not giving them appropriate credit for their outcomes - the creative products produced as a result of their research. An individual might frame a worthy research proposal and produce picture or reluctant reader books, for example, but those books would not be counted in their university's annual audit, whereas the research funds, if attracted from an appropriate source, would.

The checklist produced by Vella and de Haan (Strand 52) as a guide for research in music is useful in focusing our attention on the kind of framework that might guide us in devising a sympathetic system, even though some of their observations would need modification. The checklist presents eight desirable criteria for evaluating music performance. Two criteria with accompanying questions are reproduced below to suggest their approach:

Advancement or extension of knowledge

To what extent:

- is the performance creating new or extending old repertoire?
- does the performance represent an ongoing critical investigation?

Innovative ideas, techniques, technologies

To what extent:

- do the performers explore new 'writer'-performer relationships?
- does the performance challenge pre-existing attitudes in the areas?
- does the performance explore new discipline techniques? (Strand 52)

Each project can be rated "high, medium or low" for each criterion.

The checklist is not meant to be exhaustive or exclusive. Not all of the eight criteria need to apply to every creative project, just as standard criteria would not necessarily apply in the same way to every traditional research project. If we accept that some, if not all of these criteria might be relevant to writing, how do we go about judging what fits and what does not? The present Research Quantum already has a system that determines whether work fits its definitions and how significant that work is (ie. major or minor). It is up to the AAWP, as the peer group of the tertiary creative writing community, to define what it means by "text," and how each text should be assessed. These categorisations must be intelligible to non-experts; in addition, they must be "seen" to be reasonable.

Clearly some of the suggestions that have been floated over the past year in South Australia's state-based seminar on the Research Quantum and in national email correspondence will not suffice. The fact that a product has an ISBN will not convince a non-artist that it is the equivalent of a major scholarly book, as efficient as that solution might be. "The notion of the

level of sustained effort required to produce a given output at a given level" (Strand 122) is one effective and fair way of at least categorising work. According to the Strand report, the most frequent type of research product attracting credit is the 1.0 publication, which it calculates "*on average...would represent a year's sustained work for an academic*" (122). The length (in terms of pages or performance time) is another criterion that has found favour with arts peer groups.

Strand offers a "Checklist for the Placement of Publications at the 1.0 or Higher Level" (125) based on principles from various researchers that can apply to arts disciplines. There are ten criteria. One specifies that a product "represents a year's sustained work (at the 1.0 level)" or that "it represents 2-5 years sustained work (at the 5.0 level)" for someone classified as a "teacher-researcher academic" (Strand 125). Other criteria refer to a product's place of publication ("exhibited in a gallery...published in a refereed journal" 125), its "process of quality" review, or its compliance with a broad understanding of research ("provides us with new concepts, new knowledge, new ways of thinking about things..." 125). All of the above could be modified for creative writing, although we would need to expand the criteria as well.

The system we finally devise must be as transparent as possible. In the present schema, the auditors do not ask whether a scholarly book is right or even good, only that it has been published by a recognized commercial press. The status of the press counts as a kind of peer review, which can be less rigorous in some instances than the review procedure in many refereed journals. Marketing considerations can certainly play a part in the decision to publish scholarship, just as they can determine whether a novel ever finds its way into print.

We are looking for a system that fulfils two essential criteria: "First, works need to be evaluated by expert audiences [or critics] and second, the process needs to be cost effective" (Strand 123). The first point demands that we categorise the increasingly diverse range of creative products that we produce, both standard and nonstandard, and then interrogate them using some of the questions that stem from any understanding of the term *research* - questions about, for example, originality in subject matter or technique and conceptual advances. Our discipline has problems unique to itself, of course, so in certain cases length might be a misleading criterion to apply (as in the case of picture books, for example). Some difficulties stem from the shrinking of publication opportunities with commercial presses (particularly in the case of poetry). We would need to take into account the rise of self-publication, for instance, which the Literature Board is already in the process of doing (Nov 2001 telephone conversation with Gail Cork, Acting Manager, Literature Board). The second point demands that we vet material reasonably easily and swiftly. There are models already in evidence from other art forms that peer assess.

Accordingly, I propose that we establish as a subcommittee of the AAWP a National Peer Review Committee to oversee the production of a comprehensive set of guidelines and to determine a method of implementation. This notion was supported by those who took part in the South Australian state-based seminar and members of the AAWP Executive who responded to the minutes of that meeting. The disastrous state of affairs as far as accreditation of creative writing is concerned will only be exacerbated as technology encourages innovation and interdisciplinary work and collaboration increases. If we do not take control of the situation we will continue to find our efforts disregarded. We cannot simply insist, however, that we are the experts and we know best. We must translate our understanding of the nature of research *about, in and for* the creative arts - of the connection between praxis

and theory - so that non-experts can comprehend the significance of what we do.

Editors' Note: Since submission of this article, DETYA has changed its name to DEST - the Commonwealth Department of Education, Science and Training.

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