

Creative Writing and the new RQF

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Published

2005

Journal Title

TEXT

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Creative Writing and the new RQF

This year's AAWP conference, *Alchemy*, is subtitled *Blending Research and Creativity*. It is not alone in this focus; this year, humanities scholars and social scientists have been meeting across Australia in seminars, fora and conferences, and communicating through special-issue publications, to discuss one or both of these topics. They are building on a growing conversation among researchers; 2004, for instance, saw the publication of Paul Dawson's *Creative Writing and the New Humanities* and Paul Carter's *Material Thinking* (both reviewed in this issue of *TEXT*), along with Barbara Bolt's *Art Beyond Representation* (on creative research) and Sue North's PhD thesis *Creative Writing and Research* - four very recent Australian texts that demonstrate the vitality in local creative practice along with their embeddedness within the tertiary system. Each author also argues eloquently for the extent to which the work of creative practitioners is research *qua* research: research both as it is formally defined, and in its capacity to extend thought.

We already knew this, of course; many articles in *TEXT* and similar publications attest to the research-orientation of creative writing, and the exegeses we all write/supervise/examine are measurable indicators of its quality. We can also lay claim to our discipline's research status by drawing on the Department of Education, Science and Training, which body is master of us all, and their (OECD-derived) definition of research. That describes research as:

- creative work undertaken on a systematic basis in order to increase the stock of knowledge, including knowledge of man [sic], culture and society, and the use of this stock of knowledge to devise new applications;
- any activity classified as research is characterised by originality; it should have investigation as a primary objective and should have the potential to produce results that are sufficiently general for humanity's stock of knowledge (theoretical and/or practical) to be recognisably increased.

[\(DEST, June 2005, 7-8\)](#)

According to these criteria, much of the work we undertake as creative writers is research. This issue of *TEXT* substantiates this claim, and adds to the body of knowledge about writers, writing and research. Graeme Harper shows eloquently just how long are the lines of family connection between creative writing and the academy, and Miriam Sved traces some of the lines of conflict within that family. Gareth Beal, Kim Cheng Boey and Greg Opie demonstrate innovative and practical approaches to the teaching and practice of writing. Kim Wilkins and Philip Edmonds critique aspects of the writing field, and in the

process develop understandings of the identity of that ever-changing beast, the author. Dominique Hecq, Sarah-Mace Dennis and (in poetry) Deanne Leber discuss and describe approaches to practice and to the matter of our art-profession.

But despite the weight of research output and argument, we have not been terribly successful in achieving formal acknowledgment of writing's identity as a research discipline as well as a creative practice. Of course we're not alone in that. It's a problem that affects everyone in the humanities, arts and social sciences, and now at least we have a national body, CHASS (the Council for the Humanities, Arts and Social Sciences), acting as our cheer squad and raising our profile in government and industry circles. But there is another layer of complexity now, and that is the issue of just what we mean by 'research' in the Australian tertiary education environment; and how not only to measure, but to reward, it.

Certainly many of us have in the past years addressed this very issue, have researched and published on the question of our place in the academy. Now, though, we are being called on to ramp up this activity, to involve ourselves in our universities' preparations for the research assessment exercise, and to identify how the work we do can be measured in terms of those magic words, 'quality' and 'impact'.

The government's preferred Research Quality Framework has elicited plenty of response from around the country, much of it available through your local internet service provider. We cannot second-guess this framework, how it will apply and be applied to us. We can't even be sure about how the research assessment exercise (a phrase that strikes fear into the heart of many British and New Zealand academics) will be conducted, or how to prepare for the coming event. Nor can we, like Chicken Little, run to the king for protection; it is after all the king who is generating this change.

We could just decide to ignore it, hang onto the rocks and wait for the waters to subside. And after all, we are all desperately busy - teaching, producing creative work, handling administration, providing service to the university and the community, and even (god help us) being entrepreneurial. Along the way we are also conducting both scholarship and research; but how to find the time and energy to demonstrate this to management? And how to frame that scholarship and research so that it will earn the sorts of brownie points that confirm our status as capital-A Academics?

These are not light questions, or questions that as a body, and as individual tertiary-based writers, we can simply ignore: or at least, not unless we are willing to be even more sidelined, ignored, undervalued, excluded from the research table. Our present status there is tenuous, sometimes seeming to be based on a sort of grace-and-favour arrangement, since creative writers are, it seems, among the small things of this world in the eyes of many university executives and government research administrators. Creative Writing is not named as such or otherwise recognised in the proposed RQF Assessment Panels ([DEST, September 2005](#)), despite the increasingly visible nature of our discipline, our growing student numbers, and the increasing level of research outputs from our community. And it's not just creative writing that is on a bit of a back foot: other writing-related disciplines have been not designated as such, but collapsed into often unrelated disciplines. Journalism, for instance, is under the preferred RQF model located in

the Social Sciences panel despite the often considerable differences in research methodologies, logics and imperatives between those disciplines.

Well, okay. When it comes to research identity, writers aren't very important. We are the little finger on the weaker hand of the research body. Pierre writes that artists (in the broadest sense) are 'the dominated of the dominant' because they 'possess all the properties of the dominant class *minus one*: money' ([Bourdieu 1993: 165](#)). Once those artists move into the tertiary education sector, however, they take a step back because it is the HASS sector as a whole that is, in universities, 'the dominated of the dominant'. Writers are further down the food chain, the dominated of the dominated of the dominant, as evidenced by the fact that our creative output still doesn't attract official recognition in research measures (though this may change under the new RQF) and by the remarkable and continuing absence of creative writing even from discussions about art in the universities.

Hopefully this will change to some extent under the new Research Quality Framework. There is speculation that some creative outputs may be counted in the 'quality' and 'impact' measures, which will be a considerable improvement on the present economy. However, it is difficult to establish from the wording of the document just how 'quality' and 'impact' are to be defined and determined, bearing in mind the very different paradigms, generic forms and institutional relations followed by many of the disciplines. There is also little space in the descriptors of the three levels of impact for the sorts of work often done in the Humanities, and routinely done by creative writer-researchers, beyond the rather vague gesture towards 'altered practice'. And it is something of a backward view of research, one designed to rely on past performance rather than generating and rewarding strategies that look to the future - and this is not in our favour as a relative newcomer to the (recognized, legitimised) research game. But at least the door has been opened, if just a crack.

It is reasonable to say that we have come a long way, over the past decade, to carve out a recognised position within the Australian tertiary education sector. Now we need to continue this work in order to consolidate our position in the face of the sorts of restructure that are associated with the RQF. Perhaps as a collective we will need to be more explicit about our research role, and about the ways in which creative practice can be a mode of research, and can produce the sorts of sufficiently generalisable knowledges that will allow us to fit within the DEST categories. If so, we'll have to do this in a manner, and using a language, that research management will understand. This means more discussion and debate; active participation in local and national fora; the writing of submissions in response to policy proposals; taking up positions on committees and boards, and prosecuting the case for writing. Above all, it means taking more seriously the field of research management.

There have been extended and productive discussions in the past about such issues as the exegesis, memorialized in that case by a special issue in *TEXT*. Can we take this forward now, and respond to the government's initiatives in a way that will ensure we don't lose ground? One approach is to undertake an engaged audit of our own research (as opposed to scholarly, professional or pedagogical) practices. Perhaps we could begin by considering research assessment, of which one of the more visible evidences is examination of creative Higher Research Degree theses. We would welcome submissions of

manuscripts that analyse and explore the examination process, to establish if not protocols or models, at least commonly agreed (and transparently articulated) standards against which to evaluate research outputs.

So, propelled partly by the current status of our discipline, partly by our own curiosity, and partly by the government's research quality framework and all the mysteries wrapped up in that, let's head into what Delmore Schwartz has called 'all the foolishness which the future will bring' ([Schwartz 1948/1978: 33](#)).

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