

Nicola Boyd, 'A Creative Writing Research Methodology: new directions, Strange Loops and tornados'. *Margins and Mainstreams: Refereed conference papers of the 14th Annual AAWP Conference, 2009*

Just like metaphors, models can be taken from almost any source. In order to move from the margins to the mainstream of research prestige, to be recognised outside the discipline by the rest of the academy, creative writing needs to describe the research practice of writers.

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It appears that there is a need in creative arts to dispel the mythology that we are unable to articulate what we do, that we are muse-ridden and irrational. We may not have hit on the right methodology to comprehensively describe how we research, but I and others are making the attempt. In this work, **I am looking to describe the research practice of writers (in particular), but Arts in general, irrespective of the form the output takes – scholarly, creative or a combination of both. This means that the methodology needs to be flexible enough to include any research practice a writer may have.** While we may be able to approach describing the novel's research process, the explaining of it usually occurs in our scholarly work.

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A clearly defined methodology or set of methodologies, which are embraced by a body of academics in the discipline – providing a somewhat unified front –might go a long way to move the discipline from marginalised to mainstream. This need not mean one methodology for all or close the door on new methods; the method itself could include the ability to hybridise a number of methodologies to explain the individual's method.

I do not propose that the methodology I put forward here is definitive. Instead **it is a demonstration of how a model might be built or explained;** it is the beginnings of a language or a different way of thinking about methodology, one which focuses on trying to describe what we already do. Bunt Avieson argues that:

Writing can, and should be, a rigorous and exacting intellectual process requiring constant critical appraisal, editing, re-working, testing, more editing, reflection, editing again, reworking, more editing, more reflection, more critical appraisal and so on. In arts-based practices, the process is as important as the outcome. It is not just about 'output'. In this it is similar to the most rigorous of scientific and mathematical research. They too show their workings... (Avieson 2008)

With a tool to test and backtrack through these kinds of processes, the writer can measure – or test – the success of their research process or creative work to see what worked or didn't, so as to improve for the next project. To understand the method, I must first explain the model. I have used the Strange Loop because it seems to best describe the state in which writers research. A Strange Loop is a meme, a unit of culture, albeit a small one. I use this meme as a metaphor for how creative writers conduct their research.

The 'Strange Loop' phenomenon occurs whenever, by moving upwards (or downwards) through the levels of some hierarchical system, we unexpectedly find ourselves right back where we started....Sometimes I use the term Tangled Hierarchy to describe a system in which a Strange Loop occurs. As we go on, the theme of Strange Loops will recur again and again. Sometimes it will be hidden, other times it will be out in the open; sometimes it will be right side up, other times it will be upside down, or backwards. (Hofstadter 1979: p.10)

Hofstadter clearly understands the complexity of creative writing.

What then might a strange loop look like?

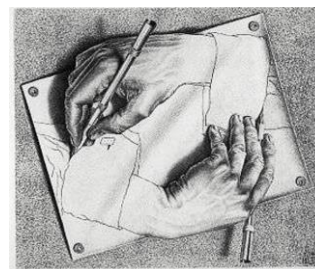
a spiral?



a tornado



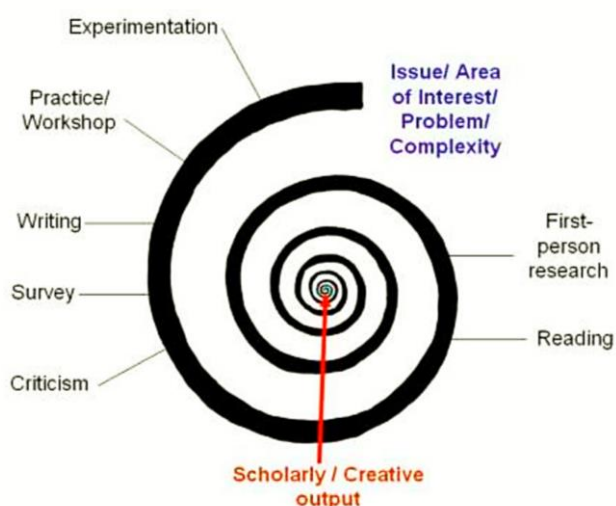
two hands drawing?



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Escher probably encapsulates it best with his two hands drawing. However, the tornado is a compelling image as the sharp end of the spiral jumps from one point to another compelled by the wider part of the funnel – this has particular poignancy when considering **Converging Strange Loop Research Methodology (CSLR Methodology)**. As research occurs in the wider spiral, the creative or scholarly output may jump from one form to another, changing focus and direction. This is encapsulated in the method itself. There then comes the question of how to use this method, well creative writers academics in the discipline will do what we've always done.

1. Specify an area or areas of interest, problem and/or complexity, acknowledging these may change as a result of the research process.
2. State an initial intention of what will be included in the first 'loop' of the research (e.g. writing, reading genre, reading theory, experience, sketching, survey).
3. Conduct the research.
4. Add or subtract items in the research 'loop'. Steps 1 - 4 will spiral the researcher toward a closer understanding of the issue.
5. Restate the area or areas of interest, and
6. Reiterate and refine until the output is complete.



This research methodology can include any other methodology you like, first person research, experiential research, quantitative research and reader/writer research – whatever is initially thought needful to understand the area of interest. This methodology embraces different practices, as whatever the researcher finds most important to examine the object of research, can be added to the converging loop and it can be used for either academic or creative output.

Some research involves moving from one question to another in a pattern akin to a spiral staircase, which takes us towards our goal via a circular path and not always one forward step at a time. (Sutherland 2008)

Strange loops use a system to move from one place to another to arrive in a similar but not identical place. With CSLR the researcher starts with an area or a broad idea and through a spiralling process of experience, reading, writing and critical thought moves toward a single idea or set of ideas to create both scholarly and creative works. The advantage of conceptualising research in this way is

that it encourages movement through various research and production modes, flexibly discarding and adding aspects of the process when needed, while enabling creative writing and other arts researchers to describe and control their research process. This process is an ongoing one, Hofstadter asserts that:

Implicit in the concept of Strange Loops is the concept of infinity, since what else is a loop but a way of representing an endless process in a finite way. (Hofstadter 1979: p. 15)

So too, the converging spiral is infinite, with its ability to spawn new research spirals and modes of research engaged in quantum entanglement as the creative writer researches.

To contextualise the CSLR in the current debate regarding methodology, I see Practice-Led Research is just one of many options available to the creative writing researcher. While it hasn't suited my own research practices, it has many advocates in the discipline. However, due to the nature of the research conducted in creative writing, often a multiple of methodologies are used. What I am exploring in this paper is the possibility of drawing these various methods together into one methodological framework. I have created a methodological hybrid in my own PhD exegesis. I have combined quantitative research in the census; a qualitative research item in the case study of Edith Cowan University's history of writing programs; and combined this with CSLR as **a process of continually spiralling reading, writing, thinking, experiencing** etc.

We are still surrounded by a large number of **colleagues from other disciplines who are unaware of the nature of our work and who think, for example, that a novel can be written in the summer break. That this belief is so prolific is an indication that we have not taken the trouble to deconstruct our research and process and to publicise that deconstruction.** (Brady 2000)

I put what I see as the central threats to the discipline less elegantly than Brady, put bluntly:

1. We do not know enough about ourselves as a discipline in the academy, specifically at the discipline level rather than individual writer or pedagogical levels, in order to further disciplinary goals of increasing the profile, influence and funding of Creative Writing
2. Some of us still cultivate an adversarial relationship with the scholarly aspects of the discipline (which stops us from making the most of the scholarly outlets available, especially the exegesis), and
3. Ironically, we are bad at convincing other disciplines – in writing – that we are serious scholars.

This does not mean that we can not convince anyone, *TEXT's* recent escalation to being recognised as a rank A journal by the *Excellence in Research for Australia* (ERA) *Initiative* shows decided progress. The concern is if the creative writers in the academy do not take ownership of the problem, then institutional and government decisions will be made without regard to important voices within the discipline. In a recent study, a working group at the University of Technology, Sydney, examined the effect of peer review on creative writing, specifically a novel, and 'the planned introduction of a peer review process for creative works to be conducted and monitored by the ARC (Australian Research Council)'. (Nelson 2009)

One of the principle issues highlighted by the UTS study - which will also become more pressing under ERA - is the extent to which the discipline of writing lacks any sort of consensus about its aims, objects and methods. For the reality is (in the absence of robust aims), that **whatever criteria are ultimately imposed by the ARC for the purpose of peer review are bound to have a strange driving effect on academic - and artistic - behaviours.** (Nelson 2009)

This idea, that the lack of clear direction in the discipline is likely to affect how the creative writer interacts with the academy, is a warning signal for writers to take action toward collective self-determination.

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