

CREATIVE WRITING RESEARCH

WHY & WHAT & SO ON

What more proper place could there be than a university, for experimenting, innovating, exploring your art and your craft to the point of producing a creative whole without compromise? (Emma Darwin)

WHY? Academic research: extracts from TSD module outline (CSEN7038)

The module offers guidance and instruction in most aspects of the process of research, from the consultation of printed and electronic resources in libraries or elsewhere to the presentation of a piece of scholarly work. In various ways the module incorporates skills training for research students as required by the research councils, including the Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC). Although this training as outlined by the research councils is primarily aimed at those registered for research degrees such as MPhil and PhD, it is also of direct benefit to MA students who are expected to conduct research and are required to write a dissertation as part of their assessed work.

The module also contains information about the production and transmission of texts. By thus building your understanding of the condition of the literary text and what we call textual history, you will be better able to appreciate editorial problems, and better equipped to make judgements about the roles and decisions of editors, in making accessible to a wider readership, scholarly editions of literary texts. You will also be encouraged to think about historical and linguistic issues in literary research. Such issues as these may influence your ways of assessing literary evidence.

Some direction on academic writing, the use of style sheets and manuals, and the methods of preparing, presenting, and publishing fully documented and referenced scholarly work will also be provided. And the module aims to build understanding of research and the ways in which it is defined, and of the institutional, evaluative, and financial contexts, at the national and international level, in which research is currently undertaken.

WHY? A methodology for creative writing?

why bother with a methodology at all? The creative arts remains a marginalised discipline, despite the healthy 7% of the higher education market it maintained in 2007 (*Department of Education Employment and Workplace Relations* 2008). This may not sound like much, but compared with Engineering's 5%, Information Technology's 6% or even Education's 11% and Health's 12%, the creative arts have significant market share, but despite progress over the last twenty years, remains a site where research outputs are not taken as seriously as those in engineering or other disciplines.

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*

WHY?

Creative arts and creative writing specifically, have shied away from the idea of methodology until recent years. Some academics, have tried to shoehorn creative arts into existing methodologies or disciplinary frameworks. While other academics support the view that practice itself is the centre of all research in the Arts and thus put forward practice as the discipline's central Methodology.

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. (Boyd, 2009)

WHAT? Consider

- The number of people who say 'you can't teach Creative writing'
- The number of people who ask what the point of a (postgraduate) degree in Creative writing is?
- The number of university managers who ask what the point of a (postgraduate) degree in Creative writing is?
- Why the Creative writing A level was scrapped in England after just 4 years.
- Why funding for visiting speakers is dropping
- Why reading in schools is so often seen as 'decoding' symbols on a page

WHAT? Considering 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

WHAT?

Creative Writing (henceforth 'CW'), as an academic discipline, is the study of creative and imaginative work-in-progress, and so **research is “practice-led”**, using the act of writing creatively as a research process, as well as studying the process and product of that writing.

It does this by means of some sort of large-scale creative piece – long fiction, life-writing, a poetry or short fiction collection, perhaps something in the new media – and some kind of commentary, critical essay or exegesis.

- Emma Darwin, 'That Itch of Writing' (Blog)

THE WRITER

PRACTICE-LED, PRACTICE-BASED OR PRACTITIONER-LED RESEARCH (PLR.)

...**firstly** research which is initiated in practice, where questions, problems, challenges are identified and formed by the needs of practice and practitioners; and **secondly**, that the research strategy is carried out through practice, using predominantly methodologies and specific methods familiar to us as practitioners. (Gray 1996)

This describes what it can be used to do, but not what each element means.

[PLR] enables the academy to look at practice as the way of bringing forth the research both in itself and in an interaction with the ideas and debates that may be teased out of it. Thus **the practice both underpins and interacts with the research**. The practice is not only important as research in its own right, it also leads the research as a significant and new contribution to knowledge that can be situated fruitfully within current academic debates and insights. (Arnold 2007: 3)

Drawbacks of PLR...

due to the nature of having to describe, rather than apply a methodological framework, the explanation of the research processes were often quite long – which is time and space which could have been devoted to other important topics in their research ...

(Boyd, 2009)

WHY? again

While I remain unconvinced by PLR, the movement in the Arts in seeking a methodology is a very important one. A discipline can find it hard to be welcomed into the academy when it can not convincingly express how its research occurs. Kroll highlights this in her seminal 2002 *TEXT* paper:

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 nonexperts can comprehend the significance of what we do. (Kroll 2002)

Boyd, 2009

WHY? Studying Creative Writing

whether it'll make you a better writer...it depends. There's a strong argument that you'll be a better novelist on the far side of your next novel, whatever the conditions under which you write it: you learn something new from everything you write. But there's also a strong argument that exchanging the brute economics of the book trade for the creative rigours of a practice-led research programme will make you a better writer still, if not necessarily a more saleable one. What more proper place could there be than a university, for experimenting, innovating, exploring your art and your craft to the point of producing a creative whole without compromise?

- Emma Darwin

CSCW7010: Writing Workshop: Research & Writing

AIM(S)

- To develop a high level of understanding of and facility for the resources available to the creative writer.
- To provide students with the opportunity to reflect critically on their own work and that of others.
- To enable students to develop and complete a piece of creative writing in a genre of their own choosing.

LEARNING OUTCOMES

Upon the successful completion of this module, the student should be able to demonstrate:

- a systematic knowledge and understanding, and creative awareness of the genre within which they are working;
- originality and imagination in the conception, design, and execution of the piece of creative writing;
- a comprehensive level of general craftsmanship in the production of the project, and especially in the use of language;
- a capacity for independent research.

WHAT constitutes research in Creative Writing?

‘Research questions’ in relation to creative works are the underlying reference points, speculations and questions that writers have in mind when approaching new work. For example, when planning a historical fiction, a writer might be interested in the legitimacy of inventing or embellishing ‘facts’ about real people or about how research and imagination might fuse. Or a writer might want to portray the subjectivity of a marginalised individual, for example, a character with severe learning difficulties. Here, the research question might be about how to render or imaginatively inhabit an unarticulated consciousness

THE UNIVERSITY & THE WRITER

<http://www.open.edu/openlearn/history-the-arts/culture/literature-and-creative-writing/creative-writing/start-writing-fiction/content-section-1.2>

WHAT?

Research con't

Research into **craft and technique** is performed through readings of comparable literature in the same genre or from studying the work of creative writers who have written about creative strategies from a practitioner's point of view. **Experimentation and adaptation of studied methods and evaluation of the effects** are recognised as forms of research.

Most creative writing projects also require **formal research to facilitate and authenticate acts of invention**. Such research may involve field visits to explore locations; exploration of historical archives; interviews with experts; readings of relevant fictional accounts; the study of customs, beliefs, or work practice.

THE UNIVERSITY & THE WRITER

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WHAT?

Research con't

Acts of writing, in their stages of spontaneous drafting, considered revision and redrafting, are recognised ... as a form of exploratory research that emerges from and refers to the creative process. .. researchers keep notebooks and a record of source materials. They supply accompanying commentaries with drafts of creative work.

After supervisions, they write an account of the discussion including insights, agreements, and plans for future work. Through this process they devise and analyse their own system of 'poetics', which forms the groundwork for the eventual critical/reflective thesis.

THE UNIVERSITY & THE WRITER

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WHY? & WHAT?

Of course, writers have always sought out mentors, thought about their craft, tried things out consciously, and observed their own process. But I do think that there aren't many writers who would sit down on their own to make a coherent story of the process of writing a novel, and the critical, historical and cultural context of its writing, in as much detail as a PhD demands: you could say it's unnatural. And yet, since part of learning to be a writer is learning to understand and manage your creative self, including your relationship to the rest of the world and its writing, then having to do just that may be very valuable in the long term too.

- Emma Darwin