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Taking time: An ethics of temporality for the discipline of writing

Abstract

Recent public debates suggest that literacy is largely a matter of standards and expedient economic outcomes. Given the debates swirling around, where does the discipline of Writing position itself? Are academics of Writing outside the debate because we believe matters of literacy are dealt with elsewhere (schools, the vocational education and training sector, university teaching and learning centres), or because we see literacy differently, or because we refuse to engage in discourses that would reduce creative endeavours to a crude instrumentalism? This paper works from the premise that, alternatively, we and the discipline are necessarily inside the debate. Literacy (broadly defined) is central to Writing's *raison d'être*, as the field claims a space that asserts and nurtures diverse writing activities. Moreover, university Writing programs' imaginative concentration on textual matters enables students and teachers alike to take the time to reflect not only on the significance and value of written language but on our accountability for its impacts. I argue that this is an ethics of temporality, and illustrate how various approaches to writing, as represented by skills, creativity and genre discourses, are embedded in ethical-temporal concerns. My hope is that this paper extends discussions about the development of the discipline.

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Introduction

What do we do? Why do we do it? And how do we do it? Questions such as these concerning the discipline of Writing in Australia have been bubbling away for some time, as Claire Woods points out in a recent paper in *TEXT* (2008). Woods declares a need for ‘a consolidated and shared sense of purpose about how ... we engage our students as readers and writers’ (Woods 2008: 3); and she argues that we need to develop ‘the capacity to argue for [the discipline’s] pedagogies, research activities and outputs with the strength of a shared set of aims and purposes’ (Woods 2008: 4). On a public platform, *The Australian* has drawn attention to Scott Brook’s recent survey of creative writing students at the University of Melbourne, which suggests that ‘there is an opportunity under current higher education policies of trying to think more broadly about [creative writing’s] role’ (Trounson 2009). And Marcelle Freiman, president of the Australian Association of Writing Programs also enters the debate, gesturing towards a discussion of the discipline’s purpose, in her ‘Message from the president’ in the *AAWP Newsletter* (April 2009), when she remarks that there is ‘work to be done in articulating what we are doing and how we promote the professionalism of the discipline’. Interestingly, her comments that follow reveal a particular concern with ‘standards’ (for doctoral degrees in creative work), and with ‘assessment standards that have educational integrity’ (2009: 2). She goes on thus:

It’s my intention that at a national level we can keep alive the dialogue about creative work and research, and about examining standards—with the aim of establishing a set of guidelines and expectations for academic creative writing (not a template, not a set of rules) (2009: 2).

Those last words in parenthesis expose a disciplinary anxiety and at least one reason for the reluctance to engage in discussions about the rationale for and value of writing education in particular and literacy generally, given that the dominant discourse mobilised to articulate such issues in much public debate is precisely one committed to the recursive, if illusory, security of templates and rules, and the linking of these to specifically economic outcomes. For example, witness Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Education, Julia Gillard’s pronouncement on literacy standards and improving measurable outcomes in Australian education: ‘Research by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development indicates that a country can achieve gains of up to 2.5 per cent gross domestic product per capita from a 1 per cent increase in literacy performance’ (Gillard 2008). To achieve such growth, the Rudd government is committed to standardised national testing in literacy and numeracy for primary and secondary schoolchildren. For the university sector, the new Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency (TEQSA) is briefed to ‘enhance the overall quality of the Australian higher education system. It will accredit providers, evaluate the performance of institutions and programs, encourage best practice, simplify current regulatory arrangements and provide greater national consistency’ (Australian Government 2009: 31). With these and similar dominant

discourses privileging empirical and objective measures to establish levels and standards (in literacy and other areas), other perspectives advocating alternative approaches can sound flimsy and insufficient to confront the endemic ‘problems’ of literacy.¹

However, as writing educators, practitioners, researchers and professionals, is it not incumbent on us to think about our discipline’s relationship to literacy, to reflect on the deliberations and controversies it generates, the better to imagine what Writing consists in and how we might carve its future paths? Engaging in the debate also has potential for extending the discipline’s scope, by resisting reductive accounts of its value and purpose, instead transforming those into socially meaningful trajectories.

And engaging actively in this conversation now is more important than ever. We live in an age when text—in its myriad forms, modes and functions—is produced and circulated through innumerable more networks than ever before. And yet, paradoxically, we also live in an age when we are likely to be less careful about the words we write or read, both because there is overwhelmingly more to write and read and because there is, it appears, less time to do so. In fact, we are probably no less hurried or harried than our forebears ever were, but the proliferation and ubiquitousness of text can result in our feeling overwhelmed by having to make choices about where to turn our focus. Indeed, according to Barbara Adam, in a market economy context, choice ‘is not an option but an imperative’ (2008a: 4). And therefore, as Zygmunt Bauman points out, the ‘hurried life’ which we now live in the west involves us in a ‘*renegotiation of the meaning of time*’ (2008: 172; italics in original). Such renegotiation, it seems to me, involves pressing ethical questions: How should I use my time? To whom or to what am I responsible for giving my attention? How do I allocate my time between competing obligations? While relevant to all areas of our personal, social and professional lives, these questions are also directly pertinent to writing, as one significant means by which we are connected (both directly and indirectly) to others. In terms of the material act of writing—whether a short story, a business report, an SMS message, a literary essay, a corporate blog—writing and reading are, of course, temporal processes. They proceed in contexts where time factors, to a greater or lesser extent, organise and constrain what, and with what attention, we might write (or read), and they therefore involve specific ethical questions: What is the relationship I’m seeking to establish (or extend, or modify) with others through writing? How does my use of language and style, my shaping of the text engage the other and for what ends? The writing spaces provided by the academy, in their concentration on textual matters, thus remind students and teachers alike not only of the significance of language but of our accountability for its ethical ramifications. Being self-conscious about the fact that, in the crudest sense, our writing ‘comes’ from someone and ‘becomes’ something for someone else gives it a history, a present and a future, and allows us to challenge the pressures of what Elżbieta Tarkowska calls ‘the presentist culture’ (in Bauman 2008: 160).

With this understanding, and aware of the government policy impulse to override the social and temporal–ethical and to prioritise the exclusively instrumental and economic benefits of literacy and writing, we can develop our own provisional versions and visions of what Writing in the academy consists in or might become.

Thus, I argue below for the embeddedness of an ethics of temporality to writing. Further, and to suggest how an ethics of temporality can re-orient our focus on writing, I sketch the relationship between the discipline and current public debates about literacy. I do this by briefly considering some of the key discourses through which writing and developing writing capacity are conventionally represented, and by teasing out their interdependence with ethical-temporal matters. Reviewing these versions of or discourses about writing helps us understand the various ways that writing, as a typically significant dimension of literacy, is socially valued and understood. Moreover, it serves to motivate our active engagement in reappraising the field in which we are immersed and encourage us to contemplate how our interests and aims in Writing might be extended or, indeed, modified, explicitly facilitated by an ethics of temporality.

Temporality: Its ethical dimension

An ethical orientation—positioning ourselves as writers in relation to others—directs us to a notion of writing as a future-oriented endeavour, rather than as a static, reactive or even regressive account. Ethics enables us to question what writing should do, ought to do in this situation or that, to question its purposes and aims and the specific relationship between writer and reader(s) that obtains. An ethics of temporality will further enable us to ask questions about what or how a text might become: how it might be interpreted and transformed, how it might give rise to particular responses, actions—to change.

But what, precisely, is the role of temporality here? It is important both to the discipline and beyond the academy, where writing and reading happen in innumerable environments, across different social, professional and community networks. As far as the university is concerned, in devoting extended time to concentrate their energies on the complex demands of reflective writing, students can move aside—if only temporarily—from a routine in which they will typically engage in what we might call ‘now’ or reactive writing (and see Woods 2008: 7). Counter-intuitive though it may feel, they can take the time to give thought to the people, places, spaces and temporalities their writing might reach. They can work on voices, forms and styles of writing that require they imagine the other(s) to whom or about whom they’re writing, and shape their texts in ways that have the potential to mean differently. They can also think more deeply about the impacts on and the consequences for others of their writing produced and circulated through different media. This is not an opportunity to be underestimated, as Robert Hassan’s account of the pressures of ‘network time’, defined as ‘digitally compressed clock-time’ (2003: 233), highlights.

Network time is one of the significant effects of the information communication technologies (ICT) revolution increasingly evident in the economy, culture and society (Hassan 2003: 233). It displaces clock-time, as asynchronous interconnectivity, so that ‘the growing number of ICT devices and applications that comprise the network ecology begins to shape our relationship to a new, emptied and de-temporalized successor to the clock—the network’ (2003: 235). We are being overwhelmed by the dominating logic of the network, that of commerce and

instrumentality. This means that the space for ‘reflection, organization and resistance’ allowed by clock time (even if such experiences through a common temporality were also potentially oppressive), has been elided in network time. As well, ‘the more we become connected and dependent upon interconnectivity in our jobs and in other aspects of our lives, the more we will live in an accelerated mode’ (2003: 236-37). Here, Hassan turns his attention briefly to the university sector, where he observes we find ‘some of the most densely informationalized spaces in society’ (2003: 238). In these spaces, he claims, more obviously instrumental and commercial forms of knowledge are increasingly prioritised over aesthetic, social, cultural and ethical forms. The liberal education that was once the *raison d’être* of the university is viewed as a time-consuming irrelevance (Hassan 2003: 238). Both universities and the network produce vast amounts of information and people adapt to or struggle to cope with this data by exercising ‘abbreviated thinking’ (2003: 239).

The potential impacts of this scenario on literacy and writing praxis are startling. Much of our developing, interpreting and transforming of knowledges and our extended interactions are enabled through reading and writing via the network. Undeniably, other notions of time are also critical to guiding and situating writing approaches and practices—including clock time (how long do I have to complete this research paper before my lecture?), historical time (what kind of language and style are appropriate to the context in which this narrative is situated?), subjective time (revising this poem is taking me forever), to name just a few. Nonetheless, network time still exerts an enormous pressure on what we write, when and how we write, to whom and for whom we write. In other words, network time is pervasive, whether or not we engage with it directly. This pervasiveness threatens to dull sensitivity to those other forms of time, which together make our lives, our writing and its capacity to relate to others the irreducibly complex and multi-dimensional processes that they are (see Adam 2008a). An awareness of the integral role of an ethics of temporality in our debates about literacy and writing is therefore imperative.

Approaches to writing—and temporality

In a paper that aims to summarise, compare and reflect on the different ways writing (in the broader context of literacy education) is defined, critical linguistics scholar Roz Ivanič (2004) argues that there are several ways in which writing—teaching, learning, doing, theorising and researching it—has tended to be represented in discourse.² Here, I focus on the skills, creativity and genre discourses only. The first of these—the skills discourse—is interesting particularly because it is a discourse to which many of us working in Writing programs are almost instinctively resistant. By contrast, the creativity and genre discourses are each worth reviewing because we tend to take the approaches and practices they represent for granted as native to the discipline.

A skills discourse, one principally dominating current policy debates in Australia and elsewhere, articulates an understanding of literacy as ‘applying knowledge of a set of linguistic patterns and rules for sign-symbol relationships and sentence construction’ (Ivanič 2004: 228). Writing is thus treated as a separable skill or distinct activity, free

from the influence of social or political context, and unaffected by matters of genre or writing purpose. Ivanič observes that the skills discourse is often harnessed ‘in times of “moral panic” about standards and “the state of the nation”’ (2004: 228), and we see evidence of this in comments such as those of Gillard (cited above). Given the capacity to measure and quantify degrees of literacy competency in terms of correct or incorrect usage of grammar, punctuation, spelling, and so on, it is easy to understand why a skills discourse is seized on by some as offering the panacea to all nature of perceived failings in education in general and literacy (including writing) in particular. However, what is often overlooked (both by the proponents and the opponents of this approach) is the pivotal, conventional role of patterns and rules in facilitating communication and understanding between interlocutors. In other words, there is an ethics of grammar to be considered: there are particular writing and reading contexts and temporalities, and relationships between writers and readers in which the use of specific grammatical conventions can matter a great deal. In turn, there are contexts, temporalities and writer–reader relationships where such conventions will matter much less. Moreover, while notions of grammar typically connote the spatial—the systems and structures comprising language—grammar is also inherently temporal (consider the role of verb tenses, for instance), and only becomes meaningful when written (or read) in time.³

A creativity discourse of writing, according to Ivanič, also focuses on the written text, but emphasises content and style rather than formal or technical properties. In this view, writing is valued as an end in itself whose primary function is to engage the reader. An approach to literacy that foregrounds a creativity discourse typically holds that the process and practice of writing itself, as well as the habit of reading ‘good’ writing enable student writers to develop their capacity to write well (Ivanič 2004: 229). In our culture, where educational expediency is prioritised, such an approach to writing is vulnerable to derision on grounds of its perceived abstractness and remoteness from the workaday world. In the face of such criticisms, we need to reassert the value of the activity of creating as a writing and revised reading of our own or others’ worlds (past, present or future). This involves a unique form of knowledge production (see Harper 2006: 3-5), one demanding writers’ intimate (and often extended) involvement with language—forms, styles, narratives—to forge a distinct way of communicating with others, whether through story, argument, description, definition or image, for example. Obviously, this approach to writing is antithetical to the ‘abbreviated thinking’ to which Hassan refers.⁴

A genre discourse of writing favours an approach that is interested in the written product as a text-type shaped by and appropriate to the social event of which it is a part. It is also specifically attentive to the linguistic features characterising a specific text-type and, in this account, ‘good writing’ is ‘writing which is linguistically appropriate to the purpose it is serving’ (Ivanič 2004: 233). A concentration on genre helps to situate, frame and organise writing. A glance through units offered in writing degree programs across the country, and through scholarly journals, reflects the importance of genre in shaping and structuring approaches to and practices in writing pedagogy and research. Yet how do we ensure that the patterning that generic forms rely on does not distract the writer from addressing the contingent, the particular,

which always exceed generic boundaries, in order to connect with readers? For instance, the continuing discussions in journals like *TEXT* about the genre of the creative PhD, and especially of the exegesis, crystallise diverse preoccupations with the malleability and transformability of genre to suit changing writing and reading concerns, purposes and possibilities. Successive postgraduate scholars can look to the growing archive of theses on which to model their own work, as well as in order to develop innovative ways of grappling with multifarious writing-related concerns and of organising these within a flexible exegetical framework. Thus they discover that there is no generic blueprint for their work. Nonetheless, they—and we who are also responsible for building this still-young archive—need to be aware of what Adam calls the ‘timeprint ... the temporal reach of our actions’ (2008b: 7).⁵

Conclusion

Being literate and being able to write means far more than acquiring the tools for economic and political expediency. As reflective writers, we learn, through taking time over language, that we have the capacity and the responsibility to engage imaginatively in a world with others through text. And whether within or outside the academy, writing is literally suffused in ethical–temporal issues, as in all realms where the self and other(s) are involved or implicated. It thus seems to me that becoming explicit about specific commitments to and investments in the discipline is enabled by placing such issues squarely in the centre of deliberations about what writing and, by extension, literacy, both might mean and involve. Toni Morrison’s remarks remind us of the urgency of protecting and fostering the position of Writing in the academy: ‘when language dies, out of carelessness, disuse, indifference and absence of esteem, or killed by fiat ... all users and makers are accountable for its demise’ (Morrison 1993). Our responsibility to care for, protect, and assert the human and social value of our writing reinforces its temporal and ethical significance.

Endnotes

1. For a coherent overview of other approaches to literacy, including critical literacy and multiliteracy, see Lonsdale and McCurry 2004.
2. Ivanič defines discourses of writing as ‘constellations of beliefs about writing, beliefs about learning to write, ways of talking about writing, and the sorts of approaches to teaching and assessment which are likely to be associated with these beliefs’ (2004: 224). The six she identifies are the skills, creativity, process, genre, social practices and socio-political discourses. Her approach is based on a multilayered view of language, in which language comprises the integration of text, cognitive, event, social and political context. I cannot do justice to Ivanič’s paper here; Ivanič herself describes her analysis as synthesis and summary of a wealth of earlier research.
3. Note Kevin Brophy’s proposition: ‘for a writer the sentence has less to do with grammatical function and logic than with a timed sensual experience’ (Brophy 2003: 28).
4. Brophy also declares, ‘time, yes, time is always what the writer needs and it must be ridiculously generous uninterrupted time if anything substantial is to come of it’ (2003: 77).
5. In further defining timeprint, Adam refers to it as ‘the temporal equivalent to the ecological concept of *footprint* which focuses on space and matter but excludes the temporal aspects of socio-environmental impacts of innovative future-making’ (Adam 2008b: 7).

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